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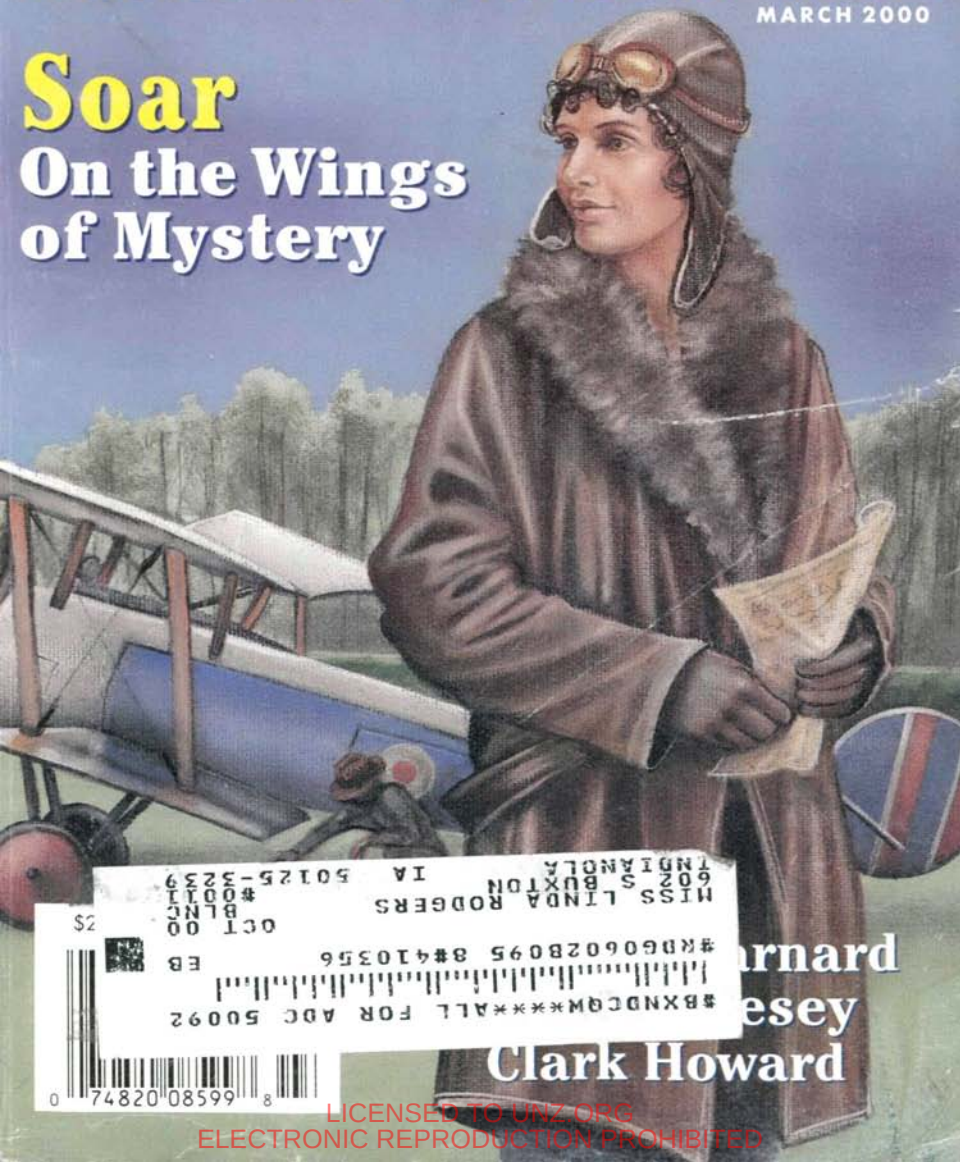

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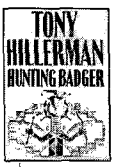

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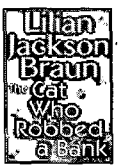

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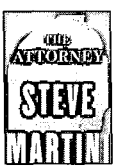

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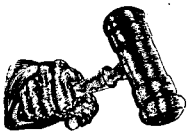

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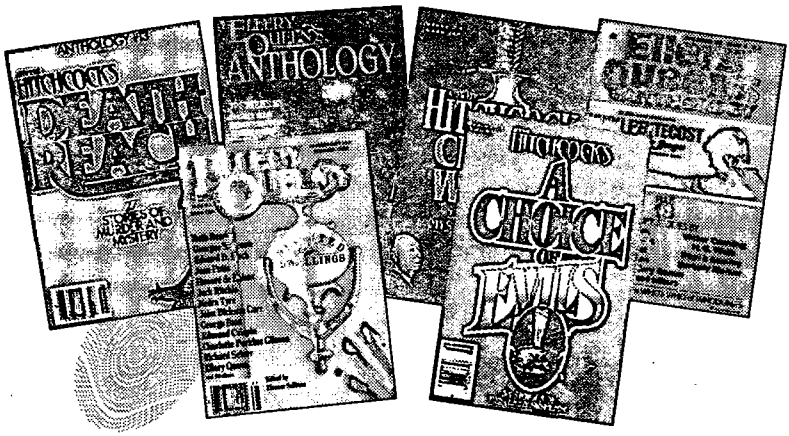

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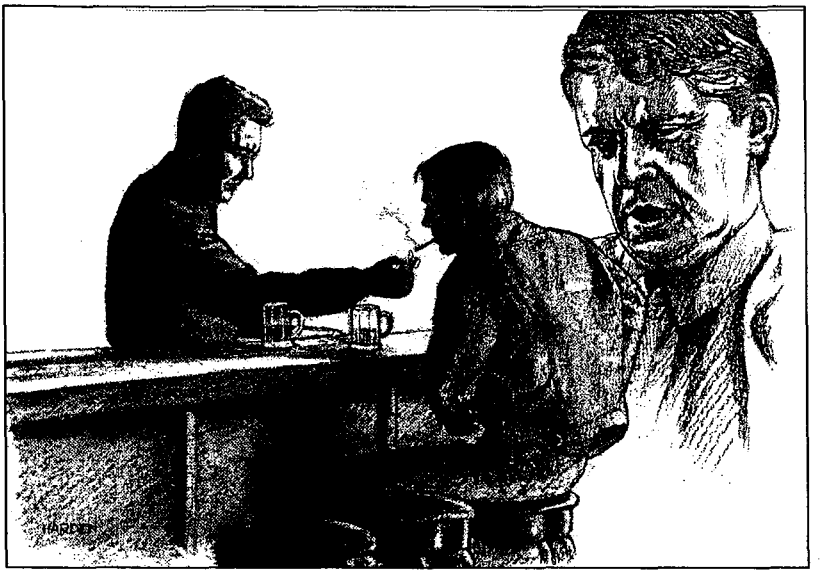

Art by Laurie Harden

UNDER SUSPICION

by Clark Howard

Frank Dell walked into the Three Corners Club shortly after five, as he usually did every day, and took a seat at the end of the bar. The bartender, seeing him, put together, without being told, a double Tanqueray over two ice cubes with two large olives, and set it in front of him on a cork coaster. Down at the middle of the bar, Dell saw two minor stickup men he remembered from somewhere and began staring at them without touching his drink. Frank Dell's stare was glacial and unblinking. After three disconcerting minutes of it, the two stickup men paid for their drinks and left. Only then did Dell lift his own glass.

Tim Callan, the club owner, came over and sat opposite Dell. "Well, I see you just cost me a couple more customers, Frankie," he said wryly.

"Hoodlums," Dell replied. "I'm just helping you keep the place respectable, Timmy."

"Bring some of your policemen buddies in to drink," Callan suggested. "That'll keep me respectable *and* profitable."

"You're not hurting for profits," Dell said. "Not with that after-

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hours poker game you run in the apartment upstairs."

Callan laughed. "Ah, Frankie, Frankie. Been quick with the answers all your life. You should've been a lawyer. Even my old dad, rest his soul, used to say that."

"I'm not crooked enough to be a lawyer," Dell said, sipping his drink.

"Not crooked *enough!* Hell, you're not crooked at all, Frankie. You're probably the straightest cop in Chicago." Callan leaned forward on one elbow. "How long we known each other, Frank?"

"What's on your mind, Tim?" Dell asked knowingly. Reminiscing, he had learned, frequently led to other things.

Short story writer par excellence, Edgar-nominated true-crime writer, and novelist with a dozen well-reviewed books to his credit, Clark Howard is one the mystery genre's most versatile authors. He has proved a favorite of *EQMM* readers throughout his twenty years of publication in the magazine, and is currently tied for the record number of *EQMM* Readers Award wins, with four first-place finishes.

"We go back thirty years, do you realize that, Frank?" Callan replied, ignoring Dell's suspicion. "First grade at St. Mel's school out on the West Side."

"What's on your mind, Tim?" Dell's expression hardened just a hint. He hated asking the same question twice.

"Remember my baby sister, Francie?" Callan asked, lowering his voice.

"Sure. Cute little kid. Carrot-red hair. Freckles. Eight or ten years younger than us."

"Nine. She's twenty-seven now. She married this Guinea a few years ago, name of Nicky Santore. They moved up to Milwaukee where the guy's uncle got him a job in a brewery. Well, they started having problems. You know the greaseballs, they're all Don Juans, chasing broads all the time—"

"Get to the point, Tim," said Dell. He hated embellishment.

"Okay. Francie left him and came back to live with my brother, Dennis—you know him, the fireman. Anyhow, after she got back, she found out she's expecting. Then Nicky finds out, and he comes back too. Guy begs Francie to take him back, and she does. Now, the only job he can get down here is pumping gas at a Texaco station, which only pays minimum wage. He's worried about doctor bills and everything with the baby coming, so he agrees, for a cut, to let a cousin of his use the station storeroom to stash hot goods. It works okay for a while, but then the cousin gets busted and leads the cops to the station. They find a load of laptop computers.

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Nick gets charged with receiving stolen property. He comes up for a preliminary hearing in three weeks."

"Tough break," Dell allowed, sipping again. "But he should get probation if he's got no priors."

"He's got a prior," Callan said, looking down at the bar.

"What is it?"

"Burglary. Him and that same cousin robbed some hotel rooms down at the Hilton when they was working as bellmen. Years ago. Both of them got probation on that."

"Then he's looking at one-to-four on this fall," Dell said.

Callan swallowed. "Can you help me out on this, Frankie?"

Dell gave him the stare. "You don't mean help you, Tim. You mean help Nicky Santore. What do you think I can do?"

"Give your personal voucher for him."

"Are you serious? You want me to go to an assistant state's attorney handling an RSP case and personally vouch for some Guinea with a prior that I don't even know?"

"Frank, it's for Francie—"

"No, it isn't. If Francie was charged, I'd get her off in a heartbeat. But it's not Francie; it's some two-bit loser she married."

"Frank, please, listen—"

"No. Forget it."

There was a soft buzzing signal from the pager clipped to Dell's belt. Reaching under his coat, he got it out and looked at it. It was a 911 page from the Lakeside station house out on the South Side, where he was assigned.

"I have to answer this," he told Callan. Taking a cellular phone from his coat pocket, he opened it and dialed one of the station house's unlisted numbers. When someone answered, he said, "This is Dell. I got a nine-one-one page."

"Yeah, it's from Captain Larne. Hold on."

A moment later, an older, huskier voice spoke. "Dell? Mike Larne. Where's Dan?" He was asking about Dan Malone, Dell's partner, a widower in his fifties.

"Probably at home," Dell told the captain. "I dropped him off there less than an hour ago. What's up, Cap?"

"Edie Malone was found dead in her apartment a little while ago. It looks like she's been strangled."

Dell said nothing. He froze, absolutely still, the little phone at his ear. Edie was Dan's only child.

"Dell? Did you hear me?"

"Yessir, I heard you. Captain, I can't tell him—"

"You won't have to. The department chaplain and Dan's parish priest get that dirty job. What I want you to do is help me keep Dan from going off the deep end over this. You know how he is. We can't have him going wild thinking he'll solve this himself."

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"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm going to assign you temporary duty to the homicide team working the case. If Dan knows you're on it, he might stay calm. Understand where I'm coming from?"

"Yessir." Dell was still frozen, motionless.

"Take down this address," Larne said. Dell animated, taking a small spiral notebook and ballpoint from his shirt pocket. He wrote down the address Larne gave him. "The homicide boys have only been there a little while. Kenmare and Garvan. Know them?"

"Yeah, Kenmare, slightly. They know I'm coming?"

"Absolutely. This has all been cleared with headquarters." Larne paused a beat, then said, "You knew the girl, did you?"

"Yessir."

"Well," Larne sighed heavily, "I hate to do this to you, Frank—"

"It's all right, Cap. I understand."

"Call me at home later."

"Right."

Dell closed the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. He walked away from the bar and out of the club without another word to Tim Callan.

Edie Malone's address was one of the trendy new apartment buildings remodeled from old commercial high-rises on the near North Side. The sixth floor had been cordoned off to permit only residents of that floor to exit the elevator, and they were required to go directly to their apartments. Edie Malone's apartment was posted as a crime scene. In addition to homicide detectives Kenmare and Garvan, there were half a dozen uniformed officers guarding the hallways and stairwells, personnel from the city crime lab in the apartment itself, and a deputy coroner and Cook County morgue attendants waiting to transport the victim to the county hospital complex for autopsy.

When Frank Dell arrived, Kenmare and Garvan took him into the bedroom to view the body. Edie Malone was wearing a white cotton sweatshirt with MONICA FOR PRESIDENT lettered on it, and a pair of cutoff denim shorts. Barefoot, she was lying on her back, elbows bent, hands a few inches from her ears, feet apart as if she were resting, with her long, dark red hair splayed out on the white shag carpet like spilled paint. Her eyes were wide open in a bloated face, the neck below it ringed with ugly purplish bruises. Looking at her, Dell had to blink back tears.

"I guess you knew her, your partner's daughter and all," said Kenmare. Dell nodded.

"Who found her?"

"Building super," said Garvan. "She didn't show up for work today and didn't answer the phone when her boss called. Then a

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coworker got nervous about it and told the boss that the victim had just broken up with a guy who she was afraid was going to rough her up over it. They finally came over and convinced the super to take a look in the apartment. The boss and the coworker were down in his office when we got here. We questioned them briefly, then sent them home. They've been instructed not to talk about it until after we see them tomorrow."

The three detectives went into the kitchen and sat at Edie's table, where the two from homicide continued to share their notes with Dell.

"Coroner guy says she looks like she's been dead sixteen, eighteen hours, which would mean sometime late last night, early this morning," said Garvan.

"She worked for Able, Bennett, and Crain Advertising Agency in the Loop," said Kenmare, then paused, adding, "Maybe you know some of this stuff already, from your partner."

Dell shook his head. "Dan and his daughter hadn't been close for a while. He didn't approve of Edie's lifestyle. He and his wife had saved for years to send her to the University of Chicago so she could become a teacher, but then Dan's wife died, and a little while after that Edie quit school and moved out to be on her own. Dan didn't talk much about her after that."

"But Captain Larne still thinks Dan might jump ranks and try to work the case himself?"

"Sure." Dell shrugged. "She was still his daughter, his only kid."

"Okay," Kenmare said, "we'll give you everything, then. Her boss was a Ronald Deever, one of the ad agency execs. The coworker who tipped him about the ex-boyfriend is a copywriter named Sally Simms."

"Did she know the guy's name?" Dell asked.

"Yeah." Kenmare flipped a page in his notebook. "Bob Pilcher. He's some kind of redneck. Works as a bouncer at one of those line-dancing clubs over in Hee-Haw town. The Simms woman met him a couple times on double dates with the victim." He closed his notebook. "That's it so far."

"Where do we go from here?" Dell asked.

Kenmare and Garvan exchanged glances. "We haven't figured that out yet," said the former. "You've been assigned by a district captain, with headquarters approval and a nod from our own commander, and the victim is the daughter of a veteran cop who's your senior partner. We'll be honest, Dell: We're not sure what your agenda is here."

Dell shook his head. "No agenda," he said. "I'm here to make it look good to Dan Malone so he'll get through this thing as calmly as possible. But it's your case. You two tell me what I can do to

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help and I'll do it. Or I'll just stand around and watch, if that's how you want it. Your call."

Kenmare and Garvan looked at each other for a moment, then both nodded. "Okay," said Kenmare, "we can live with that. We'll work together on it." The two homicide detectives shook hands with Dell, the first time they had done so. Then Kenmare, who was the senior officer, said, "Let's line it up. First thing is to toss the bedroom as soon as the body is out and the crime lab guys are done. Maybe we'll get lucky, find a diary, love letters, stuff like that. You do the bedroom, Frank. You knew her; you might tumble to something that we might not think was important. While you're doing that, we'll work this floor, the one above, and the one below, canvassing the neighbors. We'll have uniforms working the other floors. Then we'll regroup."

With that agreed to, the detectives split up.

It was after ten when they got back together.

"Bedroom?" asked Kenmare. Dell handed him a small red address book.

"Just this. Looks like it might be old. Lot of neighborhood names where Dan still lives. None of the new telephone exchanges in it."

"That's it?"

"Everything else looks normal to me." Dell nodded. "Clothes, makeup, couple of paperback novels, Valium and birth-control pills in the medicine cabinet, that kind of stuff. But I'd feel better if one of you guys would do a follow-up toss."

"Good idea." Kenmare motioned to Garvan, who went into the bedroom.

"Neighbors?" Dell asked.

"Zilch," said Kenmare.

Kenmare and Dell cruised the living room and small kitchen, studying everything again, until Garvan came back out of the bedroom and announced, "It's clean." Then the men sat back down at the kitchen table.

"Let's line up tomorrow," Kenmare said. "Dell, you and I will work together, and I'll have Garvan sit in on the autopsy; he can also work some of the names in the address book by phone before and after. You and I will go see Ronald Deever and Sally Simms at the ad agency, maybe interview some of the other employees there also. We need to track down this guy Pilcher, too. Let's meet at seven for breakfast and see if there's anything we need to do before that. Frank, there's a little diner called Wally's just off Thirteenth and State. We can eat, then walk over to headquarters and set up a temporary desk for you in our bullpen."

"Sounds good," Dell said.

Kenmare left a uniformed officer at the door to Edie Malone's

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apartment, one at each end of the sixth-floor hallway, one at the elevator, and two in the lobby. When the detectives parted outside, Dell drove back to the South Side, where he lived. When he got into his own apartment, a little after midnight, he called Mike Larne at home.

"It's Dell, Captain," he said when Larne answered sleepily.

"How's it look?" Larne asked.

"Not good," Dell told him. "Only one possible lead so far: an ex-boyfriend who threatened to slap her around. We'll start doing some deeper work on it tomorrow."

"Was she raped?"

"Didn't look like it."

"Thank God for that much."

"I'll let you know for sure after the autopsy."

"All right. How's it setting with Kenmare and Garvan? You getting any resistance?"

"No, it's fine. They're okay. They're giving me a temp desk downtown tomorrow. What's the word on Dan?"

"The poor man is completely undone. The chaplain and the parish priest managed to get him drunk and put him to bed. Jim Keenan and some of the other boys are staying at the house until Dan's sisters arrive from Florida. Listen, you get some sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay, Cap."

Dell hung up and went directly to the cabinet where he kept his bottle of gin.

At the Able, Bennett, and Crain advertising agency the next day, on the fortieth floor of a Loop building, Kenmare sat in Ronald Deever's private office to interview him while Dell talked with Sally Simms in a corner of the firm's coffee room. Sally was a pert blonde who wrote copy for a dental-products account. She told Dell that Edie Malone had been employed by the agency for about eight months as a receptionist and was well liked by everyone she worked with. Sally had double-dated with her half a dozen times, twice with the man named Bob Pilcher.

"He's from North Carolina, a heavy smoker," she said. "That was the main reason Edie quit going out with him; she didn't like smokers. Said kissing them was like licking an ashtray."

"What's the name of the club where he works?" Dell asked.

"It's called Memphis City Limits. Kind of a hillbilly joint. Over on Fullerton near Halsted."

"What made you tell your boss that you were afraid Pilcher might rough Edie up?"

"That's what Edie told me. She said Bob told her he wasn't used to women dumping him, and maybe she just needed a little slap-

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ping around to get her act together. Edie wasn't sure he meant it, but I was. I mean, this is one of those guys that doesn't just walk, he *struts*. And he wears those real tight Wranglers to show off his package. Got real wavy hair with one little curl always down on his forehead. Ask me, he's definitely the kind would slap a woman around. I told Edie she was better off sticking with guys like Bart Mason."

"Who's he?" Dell asked.

"Bart? He's a nice young exec works for the home office of an insurance company down on twenty-two. They dated for a while, then broke up when Edie started seeing someone else."

"Who did she start seeing?"

Sally shrugged. "I don't know. She went out a lot."

"Have you told Bart Mason that Edie's dead?"

"Why, no. That detective in Ron Deever's office told both of us not to mention it."

"We appreciate that you didn't," Dell said. "Besides this Bart Mason, do you know of any other men in the building that Edie went out with?"

"No," Sally said, shaking her head.

Just then, Kenmare came into the room. He said nothing, not wishing to interrupt the flow of Dell's interview. But Dell rose, saying, "Okay, thanks very much, Miss Simms. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

"Do I still have to not talk about it?" Sally asked.

"No, you can talk about it now. It'll be in the afternoon papers anyway. But don't call Bart Mason yet. We want to talk to him first." When Sally left the room, Dell said to Kenmare, "Bart Mason, guy works for an insurance company down on twenty-two, used to date Edie. Supposedly doesn't know she's dead yet."

"Let's see," said Kenmare.

Going down in the elevator, Dell asked, "Anything with Deever?"

"Nothing interesting."

The insurance company occupied the entire twenty-second floor, and the detectives had a receptionist show them to Bart Mason's office without announcing them. Once there, Kenmare thanked her and closed the door behind them. They identified themselves and Kenmare said, "Mr. Mason, do you know a woman named Edie Malone?"

"Sure. She works for an ad agency up on forty," Mason said. "We used to date." He was a pleasant-looking young man, neat as a drill instructor. "Why, what's the matter?"

"She was found murdered in her apartment."

"Edie?" The color drained from Bart Mason's face, and his eyes widened almost to bulging. "I don't believe it—"

"Can you tell us your whereabouts for the last forty-eight hours, Mr. Mason?"

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Mason was staring incredulously at them. "Edie—murdered—?"

"We need to know where you've been for the last couple of days," Kenmare said.

"What? Oh, sure—" Mason picked up his phone and dialed a three-number extension. When his call was answered, he said, "Jenny, will you come over to my office right away? It's important."

"Who's that?" Dell asked when Mason hung up.

"My fiancée. Jenny Paula. She works over in claims. We live together. We're together all the time: eat breakfast together, come to work together, eat lunch, go home, eat dinner, sleep together. We haven't been apart since a week ago Sunday when Jen went to spend the day with her mother." He took a deep breath. "My God, Edie—"

A pretty young woman, Italian-looking, came into the office. She looked curiously at the two detectives. Mason introduced them.

"They need to know my whereabouts for the last few days," he said.

"But why?" she asked.

"Just tell them where I've been, hon."

Jenny shrugged. "With me."

"All the time?" asked Kenmare.

"Yes, all the time."

"Like I said, we do everything together," Mason reiterated. "We work together, shop for groceries together, stay in or go out together, we even shower together."

"Bart!" Jenny Paula said, chagrined. "What's this all about anyway?"

"I'll explain later. Can she go now, Officers?"

"Sure," said Kenmare. "Thank you, Miss Paula." She left, somewhat piqued, and Kenmare said to Mason, "We may need to talk to her again, in a little more depth."

"We're both available anytime," Mason assured him.

"How long did you date Edie Malone?" Dell asked.

"About six months, I guess."

"Were you intimate?"

"Sure." Mason shrugged.

"When did you break up?"

"Late last summer sometime. Around Labor Day, I think."

"What caused you to break up?"

"Edie began seeing someone else. I didn't like it. So I split with her."

"Do you know who she started seeing?"

"Yeah. Ron Deever, her boss upstairs at the ad agency."

Dell and Kenmare exchanged quick glances. They continued to question Mason for several more minutes, then got his apartment address and left.

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On the way back up to the fortieth floor, an annoyed Kenmare, referring to Ron Deever, said, "That son of a bitch. He never mentioned once that he went out with her. I think I'll haul his ass in and take a formal statement."

"He'll lawyer up on you," Dell predicted.

"Let him."

When they got back to Able, Bennett, and Crain, Kenmare went into Ron Deever's office again while Dell took Sally Simms back into the coffee room.

"Did you know that Edie Malone had dated Ron Deever?" he asked bluntly. Sally lowered her eyes.

"Yes."

"I asked you if you knew of any other men in the building that Edie had gone out with and you said no. Why did you lie?"

"I'm sorry," she said, her hands beginning to tremble. "Look, this guy is my boss. I'm a single parent with a little boy in day care. I didn't want to take a chance of losing my job." She started tearing up. "First thing he asked me after you left was whether I told you about him and Edie."

"Why was he so concerned?"

"He's married."

"Did Edie know that when she was seeing him?"

"Sure. It was no big thing for her."

Dell sighed quietly. Reaching out, he patted the young woman's trembling hands. "Okay. Relax. I'll make sure Deever knows it wasn't you who told us. But if I have to question you again, don't lie to me about anything. Understand?"

"Sure." Sally dabbed at her eyes with a paper napkin. "Listen, thanks."

Dell sent her back to work and went into Deever's office, where Kenmare was reading the riot act to him.

"What the hell do you think this is, a TV show? This is a *homicide* investigation, mister! When you withhold relevant information, you're obstructing justice!" He turned to Dell. "He's married. That's why he didn't come clean."

"I just chewed out Miss Simms, too," Dell said. "Told her how much trouble she could get into covering for him."

"All right," said Kenmare, "we're going to start all over, Mr. Deever, and I want the full and complete truth this time."

A shaky Ron Deever nodded compliance.

When they got back to the squad room, Garvan was waiting for them and a spare desk had been set up for Dell.

"She wasn't raped or otherwise sexually assaulted," he reported. "Cause of death was strangulation—from behind. Coroner fixed time of death at between nine at night and one in the morning.

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Best bet: between eleven and midnight." He tossed Edie's address book onto the desk. "You were right about this, Dell: It's old. Some of these people haven't seen or heard from her in three or four years. The ones who have couldn't tell me anything about her personal life. You guys make out?"

"Not really," said Kenmare. "We've got one guy who could have slipped out while his fiancée was asleep and gone over and done it—but it's not likely. Another guy, married, was at his son's basketball game earlier in the evening, then at home with his family out in Arlington Heights the rest of the night. One of us will have to go out and interview his wife on that this afternoon."

"I'll do it," Garvan said. "I need the fresh air after that autopsy. Oh, I almost forgot." He tossed five telephone messages to Dell. "These were forwarded from Lakeside. Three are from your partner, two from your captain."

"If you need some privacy to return the calls," Kenmare said, "Garvan and I can go for coffee."

Dell shook his head. "Nothing I can't say in front of you guys. You both know the situation." He could tell by their expressions, as he dialed Mike Larne's number first, that they were pleased at not being excluded. "It's Dell, Captain," he said when Larne answered. "I told you I'd check in when I had the autopsy results. Edie wasn't raped or anything like that. Somebody strangled her from behind, between nine Tuesday night and one on Wednesday morning." He listened for a moment, then said, "Couple of soft leads, is all. Very soft." Then: "Yeah, he's called me three times. I guess I better get back to him."

When he finished his call to Larne, Dell dialed Dan Malone's home. The phone was answered on the third ring. "Hello."

"Yeah, who's this?" Dell asked.

"Who are *you?*" the voice asked back.

"Frank Dell. Is that you, Keenan?"

"Oh, Frank. Yeah, it's me. Sorry, I didn't recognize your voice. How's it going?"

"Very slow. Dan's been calling me, I guess. How is he?"

"Thrashed, inside and out. But the boys and me have him under control. And his two sisters are here with him. He's sleeping right now. It means a lot to him that you're working the case, Frank. He's got a couple of names that he wants checked: old boyfriends of Edie's that he didn't like. Wasn't for you being on the case, he'd probably be out doing it hisself. Pistol-whipping them, maybe."

"You have the names?"

"Yeah, he wrote them down here by the phone."

Dell took down the names and told Keenan to tell Dan that he'd see him tomorrow with a full report of the case's progress. After

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he hung up, he handed the names to Kenmare. "Old boyfriends," he said.

Kenmare gave them to Garvan. "Start a check on them before you go out to interview Deever's wife. Frank and I are going out to that line-dancing joint—it's called Memphis City Limits—to interview Bob Pilcher. We'll meet back here at end of shift."

Memphis City Limits did not have live music until after seven, but even in midafternoon there was jukebox country-western playing and a few people on the dance floor around which the club was laid out. It was a big barn of a building that had once been a wholesale furniture outlet, then remained vacant for several years until some entrepreneurial mind decided there might be a profit in a club catering to the area's large influx of Southerners come north to find work.

Dell and Kenmare found Bob Pilcher drinking beer at a table with two cowgirl types and a beefy man in a lumberjack shirt. Identifying themselves, Kenmare asked if they could speak with Pilcher in private to ask him a few questions. Pilcher shook his head.

"Anything you want to ask me about Edie Malone, do it right here in front of witnesses."

"What makes you think it's about Edie Malone?" Kenmare asked.

"No other reason for you to be talking to me. Story's been on TV news all morning about her being murdered." Pilcher spoke with a heavily accented drawl that sounded purposely exaggerated.

"When did you see her last?" Dell asked.

"'Bout a week ago." He winked at Dell. "She was alive, too."

"Can you account for your time during the past seventy-two hours?" Kenmare wanted to know, expanding the time period more than he had to because of Pilcher's attitude.

"Most of it, I reckon," Pilcher replied. "I'm here ever' day 'cept Sundays from no later than six of an evening to closing time at two A.M. Usually I'm here an hour or two *before* six, as you can see today. As for the rest of my time, you'd have to give me specific times and I'd see what I could come up with." His expression hardened a little. "Tell you one thing, though, boys, you wasting good po-lice time on me. I didn't off the gal."

"We have reason to believe you slapped her around now and then," Dell tried.

"So what if I did?" Pilcher challenged. "You can't arrest me for that: She's *dead,* fellers, hell!" He took a long swallow of beer. "Anyways, one of the reasons women like me is that I treat 'em rough. That one wasn't no different."

"So you did slap her around?"

"Yeah, I did," Pilcher defied him, lighting a cigarette. "Go on and do something about it if you can."

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"Where can we find your employer," Kenmare asked, "to verify that you've been here the last three nights?"

Pilcher smiled what was really a nasty half-smirk. "So she was offed at night, huh? For sure you'll have to pin it on somebody else." He nodded across the club. "Manager's office is that door to the right of the bar."

Pilcher blew smoke rings at the two detectives as they left him at the table with his friends and sought out the club manager. He confirmed that Pilcher had indeed been on duty from at least six until two every night since the club had been closed the previous Sunday.

"Brother, would I like to nail that hillbilly for this," Kenmare groused as they walked back to their car. "I'd plant evidence to get that son of a bitch."

"So would I," Dell admitted. "Only there's no evidence to plant. Anyway, the time line doesn't jibe. A second-year law student could get him off."

When they got back to the squad room, Garvan had already returned. "Struck out," he announced. "Deever's wife puts him at home from about ten-thirty, after their son's basketball game, until the next morning about eight when he left for work." He turned to Dell. "And those two boyfriends your partner didn't like: One of them's in the navy stationed on Okinawa; the other's married, lives in Oregon, hasn't been out of that state since last July. You guys?"

"Pilcher's a scumbag, but his alibi's tight," Kenmare said. He looked at his watch. "Let's call it a day. Thursday's a big night for my wife and me," he told Dell. "We get a sitter, go out for Chinese, and see a movie."

Dell just nodded, but Garvan said, "Go see a good cop picture tonight. Something with Bruce Willis in it. Maybe you can pick up some tips on how to be a detective."

"Up yours, you perennial rookie," Kenmare said, and left.

Garvan turned to Dell. "Buy you a drink, Lakeside?"

"Why not?" said Dell. "Lead the way, Homicide."

At two o'clock the next morning, Dell was in his car, parked at the alley entrance to the rear parking lot of the Memphis City Limits club. He was wearing dark trousers and a black windbreaker, and had black Nikes on his feet. Both hands were gloved, and he wore a wool navy watch cap low on his forehead, and a dark scarf around his neck. The fuse for the interior lights on his car had been removed.

He had been there for half an hour, watching as the last patrons of the night exited the club, got into their vehicles, and left. By ten past two, there were only a few cars left, belonging to club employees who were straggling out to go home. The lot was

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not particularly well lit, but the rear door to the club was, so it was easy for Dell to distinguish people as they left.

It was a quarter past two when Bob Pilcher came out and swaggered across the parking lot toward a Dodge Ram pickup. Dell got out of his car without the light going on and, in his Nikes, walked briskly, silently toward him from the left rear, tying the scarf over his lower face as he went. When he was within arm's length of Pilcher, he said, "Hey, stud."

Pilcher turned, a half-smile starting, and Dell cracked him across the face with a leather-covered lead sap. He heard part of Pilcher's face crack. Catching him before he dropped to the ground, Dell dragged the unconscious man around the truck, out of sight of the club's back door. Dropping him, he rolled him over, facedown. Pulling both arms above his head, he pressed each of Pilcher's palms, in turn, against the asphalt, held each down at the wrist, and with the sap used short, snapping blows to systematically break the top four finger knuckles and top thumb knuckle of each hand. Then he walked quickly back to the alley, got into his car, and drove away. The whole thing had taken less than two minutes.

Be a long time before you slap another woman around, he thought grimly as he left. Or even hold a toothbrush.

Then he thought: That was for you, Edie.

The next day, Dell went to be with Dan Malone when he came to the funeral parlor to see Edie in her casket for the first time. The undertaker had picked up her body when the coroner was through with it, and one of Edie's aunts and two cousins had gone to Marshall Field's and bought her a simple mauve dress to be laid out in.

There were a number of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other collateral family members in attendance when the slumber room was opened, and groups of neighbors gathered outside, easily outnumbered by groups of police officers, in uniform and out, who had known Dan Malone for all or part of his thirty-two years on the force and had come from half the police districts in the city to offer their condolences.

Dell was shocked by the sight of Dan when the grieving man arrived. He looked as if he had aged ten years in the three days since Dell had seen him. A couple of male relatives helped him out of the car and were assisting him in an unsteady walk toward the entrance when Dan's eyes fell on Dell and he pulled away, insisting on a moment with his partner. Dell hurried to him, the two men embraced, then stepped up close to the building where people cleared a space for them to speak privately.

"Did you find those two bastards Keenan gave you the names of?" Dan asked hoarsely.

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"Yeah, Dan, but they're clean," Dell told him. "They're not even around anymore."

"Are you sure? I never liked either one of 'em."

"They're clean, Dan. I promise you. Listen," Dell said to placate him, speaking close to his ear, "I did find one guy. He's clean for the killing, but he'd slapped Edie around a couple of times."

"The son of a bitch. Who is he?" The older man's teary eyes became fiery with rage.

"It's okay, Dan. I already took care of it."

"You did? What'd you do?"

"Fixed his hands. With a sap."

"Good, good." Malone wet his dry, whiskey-puffed lips. "I knew I could count on you, Frankie. Listen, come on inside and see my little girl."

"You go in with your family, Dan. I've already seen her," Dell lied. He had no intention of looking at Edie Malone's body again.

Dell gestured and several relatives hurried over to get Dan. Then Dell returned to a group of policemen that included Mike Larne, a couple of lieutenants, Keenan and other cronies of Dan's, and a deputy commissioner. Larne put an arm around Dell's shoulders.

"Whatever you said to him, Frank, it seemed to help."

"I hope so," Dell said. "Listen, Captain, I'm going to get back down to Homicide."

"By all means," said Larne. "Back to work, lad. Find the bastard who caused this heartache."

In the days immediately following the funeral and burial of Edie Malone, the three detectives on the case worked and reworked the old leads, as well as a few new ones. A deputy state's attorney, Ray Millard, was assigned to analyze and evaluate the evidence as they progressed. Disappointingly, there was little of a positive nature to analyze.

"It's too soft," Millard told them in their first meeting. He was a precise, intense young lawyer. "First, you've got the guy she worked for: older man, married, concealed the relationship when first questioned. Solid alibi for the hours just before, during, and after his son's basketball game which he attended on the night of the murder. Decent alibi for the rest of the night: a statement by his wife that he was at home. He *could* have slipped out of his suburban home when everyone was asleep, driven into the city, and committed the crime—but *why* would he have done that, and who's going to believe it?

"Second, you've got the good-guy ex-boyfriend. He's well set up with a new girlfriend, and the two of them are practically joined at the hip: live together, work together, play together. Again, he *could* have slipped out of their apartment around midnight when

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his fiancée was asleep, gone to the Malone woman's apartment, a relatively short distance away, and killed her. But again, *why?* Let's remember that *he* dumped *her,* not the other way around. Soft, very soft.

"Third, bad-guy ex-boyfriend. The hillbilly bouncer." Millard paused. "Incidentally, I understand that the night after you guys interviewed him, somebody jumped him outside the club and broke his nose, one cheekbone, and both hands. You guys heard anything about that?"

The detectives shrugged in unison, as if choreographed. "Doesn't surprise me," Kenmare said.

"Me either," Dell agreed. "Scumbags like that always have people who don't like them."

"Well, anyway," the young lawyer continued, "bad-guy boyfriend would be a beaut to get in court. I could try him in front of a jury of his *relatives* and probably get a death sentence—except for one thing: He's got a home-free alibi on his job. No way he could have been away from the club long enough to go do it without his absence being noticed. He's the bouncer; he's got to be visible all the time." Millard sat back and drummed his fingers. "Anything else cooking?"

Kenmare shook his head. "We're back canvassing the neighbors again, but nothing so far. We had one little piece of excitement day before yesterday when a little old retired lady in the victim's building said she'd heard that the building super had been fired from his last job for making lewd suggestions to female tenants. We checked it out and there was nothing to it. Turned out she was just ticked off at him for reporting her dog making a mess in the hallway a couple times."

"Too bad," Millard said. "The super would've made a good defendant. Had a key to her apartment, found the body, whole ball of wax. He alibied tight?"

"Very. Lives with his wife on two. They went to a movie, got home around eleven, went right to bed. He's got a good rep—except for the little old lady with the dog."

"Had to be somebody she knew," Millard said. "No forced entry, no lock picked. No rape, no robbery. This was a personal crime. She let the guy in." He tossed the file across the desk to Kenmare. "Find me that guy and we'll stick the needle in his arm."

The three detectives took off early and went to a small Loop bar where they settled in a back booth. Dell could sense some tension but did not broach the subject. He knew Kenmare would get around to whatever it was.

"We've enjoyed having you work with us, Frank," the senior detective finally said. "We had our doubts about your assignment, but it's turned out okay."

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"Yeah, we had our doubts," Garvan confirmed, "but it worked out fine."

"I tried not to get in the way," Dell said.

"Hey, you've been a lot of help," Garvan assured him. "Got me away from this nag for a while," he bobbed his chin at Kenmare.

"Listen to him," the older man said. "Wasn't for me, he'd be directing traffic at some school crossing."

"What's on your mind, boys?" Dell asked, deciding not to wait.

Kenmare sighed. "It's a bit delicate, Frank."

"I'm a big boy. Shoot."

They both leaned toward him to emphasize confidentiality. "That first night in the apartment, you commented that Dan Malone and his daughter hadn't been close for a while," Kenmare recalled.

Garvan nodded. "You said he didn't approve of her lifestyle."

"You said he didn't talk much about her after she quit college and went out on her own."

Dell's expression tightened and locked. "You're getting very close to stepping over the wrong line," he said evenly.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Frank," said Kenmare. "It's a step that has to be taken." He sat back. "You know as well as I do that if he wasn't one of our own, he'd have been on the spot from day one. As soon as we decided there was no forced entry, no rape, no robbery, we would have included an estranged father in our investigation. But Garvan and me, we kept hoping that evidence would lead us to somebody else. Unfortunately, it hasn't."

"Look, Frank," Garvan said in a placating tone, "it doesn't have to be a complicated thing. It can be, like, informal."

"Of course," Kenmare agreed, his own voice also becoming appeasing. "Drop in on him. Have a drink. Engage him in casual conversation. And find out where he was during the critical hours, that's all."

"Sure," said Garvan, "that's all."

Dell grunted quietly. Like it would be a walk in the park to handle a thirty-two-year veteran cop like that. He took a long swallow of his drink. His eyes shifted from Kenmare to Garvan and back again, then looked down at the table, where the fingers of one hand drummed silently. He did not speak for what seemed like a very long time. Finally Kenmare broke the silence.

"It's either that way or it'll have to be us, Frank. But it's got to be done."

With a sigh that came from deep inside of him, Dell nodded. "All right."

The tension that permeated the booth should have dissipated with that, but it did not. Dell once again became, as he had been at the very beginning of the investigation, an outsider.

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Dan Malone smiled when he opened the door and saw Dell.

"Ah, Frank. Come in, come in. Good to see you, partner. I've missed you."

"Missed you too, Dan."

They embraced briefly, and, Dell sensed, a little stiffly.

"I was just having a beer after supper," said Dan. "You want one?"

"Sure."

"Sit down there on the couch. I'll get you one." He turned off a network hockey game, picked up a plastic tray on which were the remains of a TV dinner, and went into the kitchen with it. In a moment, he returned with an open bottle of Budweiser. "So," he said, handing Dell the beer and sitting in his recliner, "how's it going?"

"It's not going, Dan. Not going anywhere," Dell replied quietly, almost dejectedly.

"Well, I figured as much. Else you'd have been in closer touch. Not getting anywhere on the case?"

"No. I've been meaning to drop by and talk to you about it, but I thought you probably still had family staying with you."

"My two sisters were here for a week," Dan said. "And there've been nieces and nephews running in and out like mice. Finally I had enough and ran them all off. Then my phone started ringing off the hook all day, so I finally unplugged that just to get some peace and quiet. I guess they all think I'm suicidal or something."

"Are you?" Dell asked.

Dan gave him a long look. "No. Any reason I should be?"

Dell shrugged. "Sometimes things like this are hard to get over. Some people want to do it quickly."

"That's not the case with me," the older man assured him. "I lost Edie a long time ago, Frank. I think I probably started losing her when she slept with her first man. Then every man after that, I lost her a little more. Until finally she was gone completely."

"Were there that many men?"

"You're working the case; you ought to know."

"We've only found three."

Malone grunted cynically. "You must not have gone back very far." He stared into space. "I used to follow her sometimes. She'd go into a bar and come out an hour later with a man. Night after night. Different bars, different men. It was like some kind of sickness with her."

They both fell silent and sat drinking for several minutes. Dell, who had always been so comfortable with his partner, felt peculiarly ill at ease, as if he had now become an outsider with Dan Malone as he had with the two homicide detectives. Finally he decided not to prolong the visit any more than necessary.

"How long have we known each other, Dan?" he asked.

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"What's on your mind, Frank?" the older policeman asked knowingly.

It had been he who taught Dell that reminiscing frequently led to other things.

"The night of Edie's murder."

"What about it?"

"I need to know where you were."

Malone nodded understandingly. "I wondered when they'd get around to it." He smiled a slight, cold smile. "Suppose I tell you I was right here at home, alone, all night. What then?"

"Tell me what you did all night."

"Watched the fights on television. Drank too much. Passed out here in my chair."

"Who was fighting in the main event?"

Malone shrugged. "Some Puerto Rican against some black guy, I think. I was sleepy by the time the main go came on; I don't remember their names."

"Neither do I," said Dell.

"What?" Dan Malone frowned.

"I don't remember their names either. But you weren't alone that night. That was the night I dropped over. We both drank too much. I fell asleep on the couch. Didn't wake up until after one o'clock. Then I put you to bed and went home. That was the night, wasn't it, Dan?"

The older man's frown faded and his face seemed to go slack. "Yes," he said quietly. "Yes, I do believe that was the night."

There was silence between them again. Neither of them seemed to know what to say next, and they could not look at each other. Malone stared into space, as he had done earlier; Dell stared at the television, as if it had not been turned off. Only after several minutes did Dell drink the rest of his beer and put the bottle down. He rose.

"I'll be going now. You won't be coming back to work, will you, Dan?"

Malone looked thoughtfully at him. "No," he replied. "I'm thinking of putting in for retirement. My sisters in Florida want me to move down there."

"Good idea. You'd probably enjoy yourself. Lots of retired cops in Florida." Dell walked to the door. "Goodnight, Dan."

"Goodnight, Frank."

Only when he got out into the night air did Dell realize how much he was sweating.

The next morning, Dell typed up a summary of Dan Malone's statement, along with his own corroboration of the alibi. After

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signing it, he handed the report to Kenmare. The lead homicide detective read it, then passed it to Garvan to read.

"You've thought this through, I guess," Kenmare said.

"Backwards and forward," Dell told him.

Garvan raised his eyebrows but said nothing as he handed the report back to Kenmare.

"I don't think the brass will buy this," Kenmare offered.

"What are they going to do?" Dell asked. "Suspend Dan *and* me? Open an internal investigation? On what evidence? And how would it look on the evening news?"

"The higher-ups might feel it was worth it," said Garvan.

"Worth it why?" pressed Dell. "What's the gain? The department's getting rid of Dan anyway; he'll be retiring."

"But you won't," Garvan pointed out.

"So? What have I done that the department would want to get rid of me?"

"Helped him get away with it, that's what," said Kenmare.

"*If* he did it," Dell challenged. "And we don't know that he did. All we know is that we can't find anybody else right now who *did* do it." He decided to throw down the gauntlet right then. "You guys going to let this report pass, or are you going to make an issue of it?"

"You didn't mention this alibi last night when we were talking," Kenmare accused.

"Maybe I had my days mixed up." Dell shrugged. "Maybe I thought it had been Monday night I had dropped in; maybe Dan had to remind me it was Tuesday."

"Maybe," Kenmare said. He looked inquiringly at his partner.

"Yeah, maybe," Garvan agreed.

"You're sure Malone's retiring?" Kenmare asked.

"Positive," Dell guaranteed.

Kenmare pulled open a desk drawer and filed the report. "See you around, Dell," he said.

"Yeah," said Garvan. "Take it easy, Dell."

Dell walked out of the squad room without looking back.

That night, when Dell came into the Three Corners Club and took his regular seat at the end of the bar, it was the owner, Tim Callan, who poured his drink and served him.

"I've missed you, Frankie," he said congenially. "How've you been?"

"I've seen better days," Dell allowed.

"Ah, haven't we all," Callan sympathized. He lowered his voice. "I'm really sorry about the young lady. Edie, was that her name?"

"Yeah, Edie." Dell felt the back of his neck go warm.

"I seen her picture in the paper and on the news. Took me a few looks to place her. Then I says to myself, why, that's the young

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lady Frankie used to bring in here. Always wanted the booth 'way in the back for privacy.'" Callan smiled artificially. "I remember that every time I loaned you the key to use the apartment upstairs, I had to make you promise to be out by midnight so's I could get the poker game started. And you never let me down, Frank. Not once. 'Course, we go back a long ways, you and me." Now Callan's expression saddened, genuinely so. "I'm really sorry, Frank, that things didn't work out between you and Edie."

"Thank you, Tim. So am I." Dell's heart hurt when he said it.

"They still don't know who did it?"

Dell looked hard at him. "No."

They locked eyes for a long moment, two old friends, each of whom could read the other like scripture.

"What was the name of that brother-in-law of yours charged with receiving stolen property?" Dell finally asked.

"Nick Santore," said Callan. "Funny you should ask. His preliminary hearing's day after tomorrow."

"I'll talk to the assistant state's attorney," Dell said. "I'll tell him the guy's going to be a snitch for me, that I need him on the street. I'll get him to recommend probation."

"Ah, Frankie, you're a prince," Callan praised, clasping one of Dell's hands with both of his own. "I owe you, big time."

"No," Frank Dell said, "we're even, Timmy."

Both men knew it was so.

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Unlucky in Love, Unlucky at Cards

by Ian Rankin

EQMM has published several nonseries short stories by Ian Rankin recently. These clever short works show how great the author's range is, a fact worth pointing out about a writer who is best known for a particular series character: Inspector Rebus. Rebus has helped Ian Rankin to achieve celebrity status with readers in his native Scotland—he can claim seven of the top ten spots on Scotland's bestsellers list—and there will soon be a Rebus TV series on the BBC. †

Unlucky at cards, lucky in love: Isn't that how the saying goes?

Which is why Chick Morrison went to the casino the night his wife finally walked out. She'd left a note explaining that she wasn't leaving him; it was just that she couldn't stand his habits any longer. He tore her note up. It had taken her several attempts: The rejects were little crumpled balls in the kitchen bin. He lifted them all out and spread them on the table, trying to work out their chronological sequence. It wasn't just a matter of the shortest one being the first attempt: Each began on a different tack.

She was leaving him because she felt lost, and had to find herself.

She was leaving him because it would be cruel not to.

She was leaving him—well, he had to admire her for all the effort she'd taken, all the effort she'd felt he merited. Or maybe she just didn't want him going after her. The thing was, he'd already started—started and finished, really. He'd been following her on and off for three weeks, had seen her enter the man's house, had watched her leave, patting her hair back into place. He'd taken to tailing the man, too, not knowing why; wondering, maybe, if he could learn something, something about the kind of man his wife wanted him to be. But all he'd felt was growing

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tiredness, and, in a moment of sharp lucidity, that he didn't care anymore, didn't love her anymore.

Which didn't make it any easier to just let her go. He'd wondered about killing her, making ever more convoluted plans. He knew the problem with murder was, the spouse was always first in the frame. So the murder had to be *perfect.* He needed either a cast-iron alibi or to make sure the body was never found. It was a matter of pride, wasn't it? For years, on and off, he'd enjoyed the fantasy of being the one to walk out, the one to make the break. And now she'd beaten him to it: *She* was the one starting the new life; which meant *he* was the one who'd been left in the lurch. He didn't like that. He resolved to do something about it.

What he did was drive into Aberdeen, park the car, and hit the pubs and clubs. And at closing time, as he was being escorted from the final hostelry, he'd seen lights and smoked-glass doors with an illuminated staircase behind them. The casino.

Lucky at cards, unlucky in love. He'd proven the latter; it was time to give the former a chance.

He walked in, watched for a little while, getting a feel for the place. That was what he did, in his line of work: He tried to fit in as quickly as possible, melt into the scenery. The person you didn't notice as you left your hotel assignation or partook of a final embrace in an apparently empty car park. Those were the moments when Chick would catch you with his camera, making sure you were in the frame.

But that night, he felt he wanted to be seen. So he sat in on a card game. Did all right at first, losing a little here, winning a hand or two there. He was not a natural card player. He knew how to play, knew all about card-counting, but wasn't up to it. He liked to pretend games were all about luck rather than the playing of percentages. He wrote out a cheque, backed it with his banker's card. The new stack of chips arrived and he began the dogged task of giving them away. His occasional brash bets were whittled away to steady tosses of a single chip into the pot. It was late in the night; most of the tables were quiet. Gamblers who'd finished for the evening were standing around the table, a phalanx which seemed to constrain those still playing. To get up and leave . . . in front of an *audience.* It would have been like walking away from a fight.

He slid another chip across the smooth green cloth, received a card. There were four people playing, but he felt it had become personal between himself and the sweating man opposite. He could smell the man, could feel his heavy breath brushing his cheek and cooling it. The man had an American accent: fat-cat oil-executive type. So when his opponent won for the umpteenth time, that was enough for Chick. He had found an escape clause, a way to get out without losing face.

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He leapt to his feet, accused the man of cheating. People were telling him to calm down. They were *telling* him he was just not a very good player. Saying it wasn't his night, but there'd be others. He was looking around for whoever had said he wasn't any good. His eyes landed on those of the American, who seemed to be smiling as he pulled the chips in with a thick, hairless arm. Chick pointed at the man.

"I'll have you, pal."

"If you get lucky," the man said.

Then there were security men on Chick, hauling him out of there as he yelled back at the table, face red from embarrassment, knowing his escape clause had turned sour on him, same as everything else. One of the other players was leaning over to talk to the fat man as Chick was dragged away. He got the idea the man was telling the winner who his opponent had been.

"Chick Morrison!" Chick called out to the room. "And don't you ever forget it!"

He spent the next couple of days not answering the phone. There was an answering machine behind the sofa, and he'd lie there listening to the messages. Usually, there was horse racing on TV, which he watched with the sound down, making mental bets which didn't pay out but didn't cost him anything either.

The messages were not important. There was another machine at his office, and it would be collecting any offers of work. Eventually, he knew he'd go to the office, get back into a routine. He tried telling himself he was enjoying the break. All he ever did in his job was provide photos for suspicious spouses.

There was nothing from his wife. He thought about heading to her new beau's house—wouldn't *that* surprise them?—but didn't. One or two past and potential clients did call him. His home phone number was part of the message they got if they called his office, though it warned them to call his home only in an emergency. The calls he listened to didn't sound like emergencies. A woman who was on her third husband. She'd had him investigate all three. He'd reported back that they were all good and true and faithful, but she didn't sound convinced.

A man who was on the run from his wife. She wanted maintenance payments, money the man said he didn't have. Now he thought she'd hired a private detective, and wanted to hire one of his own to find out.

And how, Chick wondered, was he going to get paid, when the man had no money for maintenance. . . . Some of these people . . .

But then *she* rang. And the sound of her voice made him replay the tape. And on the third play, he found himself reaching for pen and notepad, taking down her number, calling her back.

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"I'm glad you could come in at such short notice," she said.

It was after hours at the car showroom. She'd told him the door would be open, he could let himself in. To get to her office, he'd walked past a gleaming display of supercars. Chick had never been inside the showroom before; knew there was nothing here he'd be able to afford.

She held out her hand, and he took it. She was a well-preserved fifty, expensive hair and just the right amount of makeup. He told her he'd always imagined the J. Gemmell of J. Gemmell Motors would be a man. She smiled.

"Surprises a lot of people. The J's for Jacqueline."

He sat down opposite her, asked what it was he could do for her. She told him she had a repo job.

"That's what they call it, isn't it?"

Chick nodded, though he wasn't sure himself. He took down details as she told him about the car. It was a top-of-the-range Lexus, bought on credit. The last two monthly payments hadn't come through, and the buyer had done a bunk.

"I put word out discreetly," she told Chick. "I don't want it getting about that I'm an easy target. That's where you come in." She told him a garage on the outskirts of Inverness had reported the Lexus stopping for petrol. The driver had told the attendant he was on his way to his holiday place in the hills above Loch Ness. "I want you to find him, Mr. Morrison, and bring my car back here."

Chick nodded. He was still nodding as she brought a roll of banknotes from her drawer and proceeded to peel off ten fifties.

"I get a lot of cash customers," she said with a wink. "Hard to bank the stuff without the taxman taking an interest."

Chick pocketed the money. Then he asked for the driver's name.

"Jack Grover," she told him. "He has a personalised number plate." As she went on to describe Grover, a smile spread over Chick's face. She saw it and broke off.

"You know him?"

Chick told her he thought he did. He shrugged as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and added that knowing people was his job, after all. She looked impressed. As he was leaving, he had a thought.

"Any chance of a test-drive some day?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "Bring back my Lexus, you can have your pick of the showroom."

Chick was actually blushing as he left.

He knew a mechanic in Peterhead who showed him the best way to get into a Lexus and start it up. It took the mechanic about a

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minute and a half. He told Chick his teenage son could do it in twenty-eight seconds flat.

On the drive west, thoughts raced through Chick's mind. A body could disappear in a loch and never be found. Then there were the Highlands themselves, remote and unvisited. A body could lie there for months, becoming unrecognizable. And the roads around Loch Ness were treacherous . . . an accident could have you over the side.

He asked at the tourist board about holiday cottages in the area, got a list. But it might be a private house, so he bought himself an Ordnance Survey map. Each little black dot was a building. He made a triangle of Inverness, Beauly, and Urquhart Castle. Somewhere in here, he felt, he would find the Lexus and its driver, Jack Grover, the man who'd beaten him at cards.

The roads were narrow and steep, the land empty except for the occasional croft or recently built bungalow. He stopped to ask questions, not being subtle about it. A man in a big silver car: Had anyone seen him? He was living nearby. He spent two days like this, two days of rejection, silence, and slow shakes of the head. Two days spent mostly by himself. To save money and the journey back to Inverness, he slept in his Ford Mondeo, parking it on forest tracks. He knew he needed a shave and change of clothes, but those could wait. He wanted the job finished, because now he had a plan of sorts. It was stupid to blame his wife, to think of harming her. Her new man . . . well, that was for the future, maybe. But Jack Grover, on the other hand . . . he just *had* to rub *his* nose in it. Just to show him he could.

He was thinking these things when he found the Lexus. It was parked in full view, outside a two-storey house on the outskirts of Milton. Chick stopped his car by the roadside and looked around. The house seemed quiet. He drove into Milton and left his car there—it could be picked up later. Then, taking his camera with him, he walked back to the Lexus, took another look around, and got to work. He was sweating by the time he'd got the door open and started the ignition. He got his camera ready and sounded the horn, wanting Grover to see him making off in the car, wanting a photo of the moment of triumph. But no one came to the door. Chick tried again; still no one came. He felt deflated as he sped out of the driveway and down to the banks of the loch, taking the road back into Inverness.

But as he crossed the Caledonian Canal, he felt the car's steering slip, and a low juddering from beneath. He pulled over and found that he had a puncture. Cursing silently, he kicked the tire and opened the boot, looking for a jack and spare tire.

And found, instead, a body.

Not any old body, but that of the card player, Jack Grover. Chick stumbled backwards and turned his head to be sick on the

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verge. Trembling, approaching the boot again, he took a handkerchief out to wipe his mouth. The bundle of notes came with it, floating into the boot. He reached in for them . . . beginning to wonder now. Cash in hand, untraceable . . . Gently, he patted the dead man's pockets and reached a hand into one, bringing out a wallet. He thought he could hear a siren in the distance. There were credit cards in the wallet, and the same name on all of them: James Gemmell. The JG on the number plate stood for James Gemmell, not Jack Grover.

He saw it in a flash: There was no Jack Grover; no stolen Lexus. There was just Jacqueline Gemmell's husband, who had gone home and told his wife about some drunk in the casino who'd been steamed up at him, a private detective, of all things. . . .

The sirens were closer now. Chick rubbed his jaw, feeling the rasp of his beard, seeing himself dishevelled and dirty, recalling all the witnesses who would say he'd been looking for a man in a Lexus. And the witnesses at the casino—he'd told them to remember his name. . . .

Seeing, with absolute clarity, the way he'd been used by Gemmell's wife, who had found for herself the perfect way to get rid of an unwanted spouse. Chick had been wrong: You didn't need an unbreakable alibi or some obscure hiding place. All you needed was someone like him, unlucky in love, unlucky at cards. Someone you could put in the frame. . . . ●

"PETER PIPER PACKED A BARETTA AR-70 EQUIPPED WITH A THIRTY ROUND MAGAZINE . . . . "

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The Problem of Annabel's Ark

by Edward D. Hoch

Most fans of Edward D. Hoch's short stories have favorite series; this editor's, we may as well confess, are the Captain Leopold and Dr. Sam Hawthorne tales. It's always a good day when a new Hawthorne story appears in our offices; Mr. Hoch manages to combine details of daily life in the WWII and pre-WWII era, an overview of world events, and a cracking good impossible-crime plot in nearly every outing.

I haven't really told you much about the other doctors in Northmont (Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he took down the wine bottle and poured the traditional small libation for himself and his visitor), because when I arrived in 1922 I was the only one in town. The situation greatly improved in '29 with the opening of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital and the arrival of some good new residents, among them my friend Lincoln Jones, the town's first black doctor. By September of 1940, Linc had married and was raising two children in Northmont, and his son Nat was at an age where he wanted a pet dog for the sort of companionship his kid sister couldn't provide.

It was the Saturday after Labor Day, and between patients my nurse Mary Best and I were discussing the week's big news. President Roosevelt had traded fifty overage destroyers to Britain in exchange for 99-year leases on eight strategic sea and air bases in the Western Hemisphere. "We're moving closer to war all the time," Mary decided. "I'm just afraid we'll be in it a year from now."

"That all depends on Hitler," I responded. "I can't believe he's foolish enough to try invading England."

Linc Jones poked his head in the door at that moment. "What's this? Are you two talking about the war? Business must be slow."

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"Well, what are you doing strolling around the doctors' annex?" Mary challenged with her usual grin. She liked Linc. "Don't you have any patients to see?"

"All cured and on their way home. My biggest concern right now is Turner, Nat's pooch. He's got a bad case of diarrhea, and I can't convince the boy that I only treat two-legged patients."

"Sam will help you."

"Thanks, Mary," I grumbled. Then, turning serious for a moment, I asked, "Didn't I hear of a veterinarian opening a place on the way to Shinn Corners?"

Linc nodded. "I'm on my way there now, soon as I pick up Turner. Want to come along?"

"It's a woman, isn't it?"

"So I hear. Annabel something. Calls her place Annabel's Ark."

"Cute," was all Mary could say. "You two run along and have your fun."

"Am I clear till two o'clock?" I asked her, making a pretense of being businesslike.

"All clear. If the lady vet delays you two, let me know."

Linc Jones was a tall, handsome man in his mid forties, maybe a year or two older than I was. We took his car ("You don't want Turner messing up your Buick, Sam.") and drove out to Town Line Road where he and Charlene had purchased a house a few years back. His wife was a dark-skinned beauty, and they made a handsome couple at social events around town. It was Charlene, now, who came out of the house carrying Turner, the sick mongrel pup, wrapped in a towel. I wondered for the first time if Linc had invited me along to ease the tension of a black man calling on a white woman veterinarian.

"How are you, Sam?" Charlene called out as Linc hurried to take the dog from her.

"Can't complain on a day like this," I replied. "I guess poor Turner could be better, though."

"Maybe the new lady vet can fix him up," she said, "if she's not too busy with cows and horses."

I got the job of holding Turner in his blanket while we drove the rest of the way out to Annabel's Ark. It was about halfway to Shinn Corners, a perfect location for drawing customers from both towns. The white cinder-block building was one story high, about the size of a small house, and a milk box near the door contributed to the homey feeling. A small sign with tasteful gold letters identified it as *Annabel's Ark—A Shelter For All Creatures.* There were only two cars in the parking lot when we arrived, a sleek little Lincoln-Zephyr coupe and a black Plymouth sedan. I figured anyone who'd name her place Annabel's Ark had to be driving the Lincoln-Zephyr.

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We rang the bell and walked in to be greeted by a variety of woofs and snarls.

There were half a dozen dogs and cats in separate cages and they didn't seem happy to be there. A young woman wearing a white coat came out to greet us. "You must be Dr. Jones," she said to Linc. "Your wife called in about Turner. I'm Annabel Christie. Don't mind my patients. They'll calm down in a moment."

Close up she looked more like a movie star than a veterinarian. It wasn't that she was beautiful, exactly, but her blond hair, hazel eyes, bright smile, and sharp features all contributed to an almost magnetic attraction. I was embarrassed that I couldn't keep my eyes off her. "You can call me Linc," he was telling her. "This is my friend Dr. Sam Hawthorne."

She turned her smile on me, full force. "I've heard about you, Dr. Hawthorne. You're the local Sherlock Holmes."

"I like to think of myself more as Dr. Watson, though he didn't have much of a practice."

"Same initials as Holmes, though," she persisted.

"That's been pointed out to me before. And you're A. Christie, like that British mystery writer."

"Annabel Lee Christie, not Agatha." She turned her attention to Turner, examining the mongrel pooch with a tender hand. "What's the matter, boy? Not feeling good?" The dog whimpered in response.

"He's had this diarrhea the last few days," Linc told her. "He was running around the fields Monday when we had a few people in for a Labor Day barbecue. I suppose he ate something that was bad for him."

She nodded. "A thoughtless guest or just some bad weeds out in the field. I've seen worse cases." She finished her examination. "I'll give him an injection. Then mix this powder with his food for forty-eight hours. He should be back to normal by then."

"Thank you, Dr. Christie. How much do I owe you?"

She shrugged. "Let's call it ten dollars. Professional discount."

"I'll have to remember that," I told her. "I'll come see you the next time I have a case of distemper."

She eyed me with a smile. "You do that, Dr. Hawthorne."

A young man came out of the back room carrying a slim Siamese cat. "She's a bit perkier now," he announced. "I think we can move her to a cage out here."

"That's good. Ray Perkins, my assistant, this is Dr. Jones with his dog Turner, and Dr. Hawthorne."

"Pleased to meet you," he said, placing the cat in one of the empty cages. The nearest dog immediately started growling, and Perkins moved the Siamese to a different cage facing the front door. The young man was tall and slender, moving with the awk-

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wardness of youth. I guessed him to be in his early twenties, probably ten years younger than Annabel Christie.

"This Siamese has a blockage of some sort," she explained. "Just the opposite of Turner's trouble. We may have to operate if she's not better by Monday."

Linc paid her the ten dollars, and I scooped up Turner in his blanket. "Nice meeting you, Dr. Christie," I said. "That's a neat-looking Lincoln-Zephyr you've got outside."

Annabel Christie laughed as we departed. "Things aren't always what they seem. My car's the Plymouth."

My meeting with Northmont's first veterinarian might have amounted to no more than that, except for what happened the following Monday. I'd risen early on Sunday, brought in the milk and paper, and read the latest news about a huge daylight air raid in London. After weeks of bombing by the Luftwaffe, the British government had issued an invasion warning, convinced that Germany was about to strike across the English Channel. The September seventh raid only heightened that fear. Some 300 German bombers and 600 fighter planes hit London's dock area with deadly accuracy. Guided by the still-blazing fires, the planes returned that night for another attack.

"If they do invade England, we're in it," Mary Best said somberly as we discussed it at the office the following morning. "I feel I should be doing something."

"You are doing something, right here," I reminded her.

"I mean something more, for the war effort." She turned away for a moment. "I was reading that the army needs nurses."

"Mary—"

She waved me off. "I'm just thinking about it. I haven't made any decision yet."

In the five years that Mary had been my nurse, our relationship had developed into far more than that. I sometimes escorted her to dances and parties, and we'd even taken a vacation with another couple. I felt closer to her than to any other woman I knew. But before we could discuss the matter further the telephone rang and she reached across the desk to answer it. "Dr. Hawthorne's office." She listened and said, "Just a moment, please."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Dr. Christie," she replied, passing the phone to me without changing her expression.

Annabel Christie's familiar voice came on the line. "I'm sorry to bother you like this, Dr. Hawthorne, but I wonder if you might be out my way today or tomorrow. I have a little problem here that may call for your detective skills."

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"If you've had a break-in, Sheriff Lens should be notified."

"There are no signs of a break-in, but that Siamese cat you saw the other day seems to have been strangled in its cage."

I hesitated a moment and then said, "I'm making a house call on Mrs. Rawlings this afternoon. It won't be any problem to swing by the Ark."

"I'd appreciate it."

When I told Mary about it she scowled. "A dead cat? She called you about a dead cat?"

"There seem to be some mysterious circumstances. I think she wants my opinion."

Mary started working on the bookkeeping and said no more about it.

Mrs. Rawlings was a farm widow like so many of Northmont's older residents. Her husband had died in his sixties, and she'd been left with farmland rapidly going to seed. Her only son, Gordon, a milkman who lived in town, came out when he could to help her with the place, but his heart wasn't in farming. Though I treated Rose Rawlings for a variety of minor complaints, she mostly summoned me as an audience of one for a litany of her woes.

"Why don't you sell the place and move into town, Rose?" I asked her on that day's visit. "You'd be closer to your sister." It was not the first time I'd made the suggestion. Dora Flagel, a widow herself, was Rose's only sibling. Dora's late husband had left no relatives, and she lived by herself in town.

But Rose only shook her head. "Randy put his life into it, and I know someday Gordon will want to farm it too. He spent his boyhood back in those woods, catching grass snakes with a snare at the end of a long pole."

"Catching snakes as a child is different from growing a hundred acres of corn as an adult, Rose."

"He'll come back someday," she said with a sad smile. "I want it to be here."

It was not my job to deflate an old woman's dream. I gave her some pills and went on my way.

Annabel's Ark wasn't really close to the Rawlings farm at all, but I figured Dr. Christie wouldn't know that I'd gone out of my way to visit her the same afternoon. The sun was pushing up the late summer temperature as I pulled into her small parking area. This time there were four cars there. Inside I had to wait while Ray Perkins delivered a happy puppy to one man and a fat tabby cat to a woman I knew slightly from town.

"Is Dr. Christie around?" I asked the young man when we were finally alone.

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"She's with the monkey," he replied.

"Oh. Do you think she'll be long?"

"I'll see." He went into the treatment room, closing the door behind him.

After a moment Dr. Christie appeared, wiping her hands. "Sorry if you had to wait, Doctor. I was treating someone's pet for wasp stings. It wasn't easy."

"I'll bet it wasn't." I smiled at her. "You know, this 'Doctor' business isn't necessary among colleagues. Let's just be Annabel and Sam."

"Fine by me, Sam."

"Now what happened here?"

She indicated the empty cage opposite the door, where I'd seen Perkins place the cat on my visit two days earlier. "This is where I found her dead, as soon as I walked in this morning," she told me in a flat voice. "The Siamese named Sabbath. She belonged to Mrs. Flagel."

"Flagel? Not Dora Flagel?"

Annabel nodded. "Do you know her well?"

"She lives a block away from me in town, but we're just casual acquaintances. Her sister is a patient of mine. In fact, I just came from a house call there."

"I phoned Dora as soon as we found Sabbath's body this morning. She's very upset."

"I'm sure she is. Judging by the size of her house and yard, she's a woman who values her possessions. But what made you think I could help?"

"The place was locked up tight and there was no sign of a break-in. The cage was also shut." She pulled the knob of the spring latch to open it, then swung the door shut until the latch snapped into place.

I went over to examine the front door. It was a solid piece of wood without any window, and the lock was the latest type of Yale. I asked for her key and she produced a ring of them from her purse, indicating a shiny new one. It slid into the lock with ease, and the door's bolt worked smoothly. "Does anyone have a key besides you and Ray?"

She shook her head. "I have the only key. Ray's just worked here three weeks. I haven't had a duplicate made for him yet."

"The animals are left alone at night?" I asked.

"Usually, unless there's a special problem with one of our patients." She motioned toward the closed door to the back room.

"Ray said you were with a monkey."

"I wish it were that simple. Come back with me. I want you to see Sabbath's body anyway."

"Dora Flagel hasn't picked her up yet?"

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"She doesn't want to. Says she wants to remember Sabbath as she was. I'm to dispose of the body. I told her I'd bury it out in back."

She led the way into the rear room, where Ray Perkins had his hands full. This was no monkey but a large long-armed ape some four feet tall, thrashing about violently as Annabel's assistant attempted to lock him in his cage. "What is it?" I asked in alarm.

She shook her head sadly, but more over Ray's shortcomings as a handler than the great ape's antics. "I'll do it," she told him, moving in quickly with a broomstick to prod the creature back into its cage far enough so she could slam the door and slip the hasp over its metal staple. Then she put a padlock through the staple without locking it. Belatedly, she answered my question. "It's an orangutan named Pedro."

"Who'd have that as a pet?"

"A retired seaman named Vespa over in Shinn Corners. He brought it back from Sumatra, but now the poor creature's been stung by wasps. I'm treating him the best I can."

"Don't you lock him in?"

"He won't get out of there. If I locked it and there was a fire, how could they rescue him? At least the front door and the windows could be smashed in. Actually, I'm pleased to be treating something larger than dogs and cats. The folks around here haven't quite trusted me with their bulls and cows and horses yet."

I turned away from the great ape and went over to the examining table. The dead cat lay covered by a white cloth that I carefully lifted off. Annabel came to my side and pushed away the fur at its neck to show me the thin red line around the throat. "She was strangled by a cord or wire."

I picked up one of the dead cat's paws. "There's dried blood here too. One of her claws was partly torn out. The killer may have a scratch on him."

"Why would anyone do something like this to a helpless cat?" she wanted to know.

"The question that puzzles me is how they did it. The front door shows no sign of tampering." My eyes roamed the examining room, taking in a refrigerator and a narrow cot beneath a single small window with a view of the backyard. I walked to a rear door covered by an inner door of heavy mesh screening. "Is this the only other entrance?"

"Yes, it's for supplies. You can see the door itself is padlocked on the inside, and I had this mesh screen door installed so we could circulate the air in summer without the danger of any animals escaping. It's also padlocked, though I may open it if this heat keeps up."

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"The windows?"

"There are only two, one in each room, and both were firmly latched on the inside."

We went back out front, leaving the orangutan beating at the bars of its cage and looking quite healthy to me. Ray Perkins was tidying up and preparing to feed the patients. He took a quart bottle of milk from the refrigerator and filled four small dishes for the remaining cats, then produced a bag of cat food. I smiled at Annabel. "Is there any chance you walk in your sleep?"

"None. And the key never left my ring. It's a tricky thing to get off." She showed me.

"No one could have stolen it long enough to make a copy?"

She shook her head. Ray finished his job and joined us. "Still trying to figure out how the cat was killed?"

"Any ideas?" I asked him.

"Beats me. No one got in here during the night, that's for sure."

"Did you two leave together?"

"We always do," Annabel answered for him, "unless I have to stay late with the animals."

"Does that happen often?"

"Only once in the six weeks I've been open. That's what the cot in the examining room is for, in case I have to sleep over."

"But you weren't here yesterday?"

"I stopped by to feed the animals and administer some medication. Sabbath was fine then. I think she must have been killed early this morning. When I arrived at eight and found her, the body was still warm."

I turned to the assistant. "What about you, Ray? Were you here too?"

He nodded. "I drove in a minute or two before her. I was waiting in my car, like always."

"But you didn't see anything unusual?"

"Nothing." There was only a little milk left in the quart bottle. He drank it himself, washed out the bottle in the sink along one wall, and pulled open the milk box to add it to the other empties. Then he asked Annabel, "Do you want me to bury the cat?"

I could see it was a distasteful decision for her to make. "Oh, I suppose so." She turned her eyes to me. "This is the first death I've had. It wasn't my fault, but I suppose I'm responsible."

"Let me look into it," I told her. "Strangled cats are a bit out of my line, but this does seem to be a locked-room mystery of sorts."

I wanted to call on Dora Flagel, but first I decided to stop by the sheriff's office and inquire about any other mysterious break-ins around the area. Sheriff Lens gave me a warm welcome, as always. He was my oldest friend in Northmont, but he couldn't help me with break-ins. "Other than a couple of missing chickens

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it's been a quiet time, Doc. You got something I haven't heard about?"

I outlined the cat killing at Annabel's Ark and Sheriff Lens gave a little snicker. "I never knew you to be so interested in the death of a cat. But there's no doubt our new vet's a handsome young lady."

"She asked me to look into it and I am, Sheriff. Someone strangled that cat and I'm wondering why. And how."

"From what you tell me, I'd question her assistant some more. Seems like he's the most likely suspect."

"How'd he get in to do it?"

"Maybe the cat wasn't dead when they came in, only sleeping. While Doc Christie was checking on her other patients he quietly opened the cage and strangled the cat."

"The cage is facing the door, not six feet away. It was the first thing she saw when she walked in."

"Well, Doc, one thing I've learned from you in eighteen years is that things aren't always what they seem."

"Annabel Christie told me the same thing when I met her Saturday."

I drove over to Dora Flagel's place after that. It was a handsome Victorian house, one of the oldest in Northmont, with a large rock garden in the side yard that produced a variety of small blossoms almost all summer long. Both garden and grass were well tended. Mrs. Flagel, a widow like her sister, was a stout woman in her early sixties with graying hair and a pleasant manner. She wore thick eyeglasses, and it took her a moment to recognize me. She was surprised when I indicated I was looking into the death of her cat Sabbath, and she led me inside to the living room.

"I know you have a reputation for solving unusual murder cases, Dr. Hawthorne, but my poor cat hardly qualifies."

"She certainly died under unusual circumstances, Mrs. Flagel. Do you know of any reason why someone might want to kill her?"

"Certainly not! She never bothered another living creature." She amended that to add, "Except for an occasional bird, of course."

"Do you know a young man named Ray Perkins?"

She frowned in thought. "I don't believe so."

"He's Dr. Christie's assistant at the Ark."

"Oh! I met him when I brought Sabbath in, but I didn't remember his name. He seemed like a nice chap."

"You've received no threats of any kind? Nothing unusual?"

"Of course not." She seemed about to add something, but hesitated. When I prodded her a bit she told me, "Last week I lost a valuable diamond from my best dinner ring. It looked as if two of

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the prongs holding it in place got bent somehow. I've been searching the house, but I still haven't found it."

"Could you have had a burglar?"

She snorted at the idea. "A burglar would have stolen the entire ring, wouldn't he?"

I glanced around at the spotless living room. "Do you have a cleaning woman to help you here, Mrs. Flagel? Or a gardener for outside?"

"My nephew takes care of the lawn and garden. A cleaning woman comes by every fortnight, but she wasn't here last week. There was no robbery, but I just wish the diamond would turn up. It was an anniversary gift from my late husband."

"Is it insured?"

"Of course. If I can't find it I'll have to notify the company."

"When was Sabbath taken ill?"

"On Friday, the day before I took her to the Ark."

"Had Dr. Christie treated her before?"

"I believe Sabbath was the Ark's first patient. My Siamese had a bit of distemper right after it opened."

"You've been very helpful, Mrs. Flagel," I told her. "I'll do everything I can to locate the person who caused Sabbath's death."

"That would be a great consolation to me, Doctor."

I took the back road over to Shinn Corners next, traveling some fifteen miles before I topped Holy Hill and saw the village nestled in the wrinkled valley a mile below. Finding a retired seaman named Vespa in a place this size shouldn't be too difficult, I reasoned, and it wasn't. A gas station attendant directed me to a small house a few blocks down the street, cautioning me to watch out for the ape.

There was a man in his sixties in the yard, wearing the peaked cap of a naval officer. His weathered face left little doubt that he was the one I sought. "Mr. Vespa?" I asked, unlatching the gate to join him in the yard.

"Do I know you?"

"I'm a doctor. I've come about your orangutan."

"Is he dead? Is Pedro dead?" He seemed on the verge of tears.

"No, nothing like that. I happened to visit Annabel's Ark today and saw him. She's still treating him but he seems in good shape to me."

The old seaman's relief was immediately obvious. "Thank God! He has been my companion for two decades, on land and sea. I would not want to live without him."

I detected the trace of an accent, perhaps Italian. I knew his name was the Italian word for wasp. "Why would a former sailor settle so far inland?" I wondered.

"Because of Pedro! I wanted a little place on the coast, maybe

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Cape Cod, but people wouldn't allow me to keep Pedro as a pet. They said he belonged in a zoo! I had to come here to find a village where it was all right."

"Do you keep him in a cage?"

"At night? Of course, yes. Otherwise he would be swinging from tree limbs."

"Could I see where he's kept?"

Vespa was growing suspicious. "Why do you ask all this? Will you make me move again?"

"No, I can assure you of that. I'm looking into an accident at the veterinarian's place."

"Pedro?"

"Not Pedro. It was a cat."

He led me into the little cottage. It was sparsely furnished, but a large fishing net was draped over one wall and a ship's sextant rested on one table. The only picture on the wall was a print of a Winslow Homer painting showing a sailing ship against a sunset. "I keep Pedro in here at night," he said, leading the way into a back bedroom.

The cage was smaller and less sturdy than the one at Annabel's Ark, but apparently it did the job. Out the back window I could see a fenced yard and some trees for climbing. Perhaps Pedro had found a suitable retirement home here. "Has he ever had any trouble with neighbors' pets?"

"No, never! He is a gentle giant." Vespa smiled when he said it, and I hoped Annabel Christie would soon be able to reunite him with the orangutan.

But there was something I had to do first.

It was almost six by the time I got back to the office, and Mary was just closing up. "I thought you'd gone on home," she said.

"I took a ride over to Shinn Corners. Any calls?"

"Dr. Christie again. She said it wasn't important."

"I'll check with her, and I want to call Sheriff Lens, too. You can go on home."

When I reached the sheriff he was baffled by my request. "You're doing what, Doc? Spending the night with an ape?"

"I think it's the only way I can crack this case, Sheriff."

"What case? You've got a dead cat, nothing else. That's not even a felony. You want me to arrest someone for cruelty to animals? Hell, the judge would probably let him off with a hundred-dollar fine."

"Just do it as a favor. I need you out there tonight."

He gave a long sigh. "Doc, I think you've gone batty. But if you want me, I'll be there."

Next I called Annabel Christie and told her, "I want to spend the night in your back room, watching the orangutan."

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"He won't be here, Sam. That's what I called to tell you earlier. I cured his wasp stings. I'm about to phone Vesta to pick him up."

"Can't you keep him one more night?"

"Is it important?"

"I think so, yes. I'll be out there shortly. Maybe we can get something to eat and then you can lock me in with Pedro for the night."

"Not alone," she told me. "If you stay, I stay."

"That's hardly necessary."

"Look, Sam, it's my place. I'm just getting started here in Northmont, and I have an investment to protect. I can't afford to lose another animal."

"You won't. I'll be out there in a half-hour."

It was dark when I reached the pet hospital, and she was waiting for me out front. We drove to a nearby roadhouse that served good food at a reasonable price. Over dinner she remarked that she'd never been there before. "You'll have to show me more of Northmont's sights."

"I'd be happy to. Any new patients today?"

She shrugged. "Just a dog with ticks. I'm still waiting to make a house call on a cow."

I couldn't help laughing. "You will, sooner or later."

"At least I haven't killed anyone yet." Then the smile vanished as she remembered Sabbath. "I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking."

"You weren't responsible for her death, and I intend to prove it. Did Ray bury her out back?"

She nodded. "But I can't turn the place into a pet cemetery. In the future I'll make arrangements with a crematorium in the city if the owner doesn't want the body."

The food was good, and we even had room for some chocolate cake for dessert. Then it was back to the Ark. "I'll park my car down the road," I suggested. "Maybe you can move yours too."

She looked at me quizzically. "What do you think is going to happen?"

"Nothing, I hope."

I was pleased to see that the cages out front were all but empty. Most of Annabel's cats and dogs had been sent back to their owners. In the back room she joined me on the cot facing Pedro's cage. The great ape sprang up and clung to the bars but soon tired of showing off for us.

"Is this proper?" she asked. "We're spending the night together seated on a cot."

"All in the interest of research," I assured her. "Is that padlock the way it was Sunday night?"

"That's right. Through the staple but unlocked. Are we waiting to see if he can get out of that cage?"

I didn't answer directly but took a flashlight from my jacket

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pocket. "Could you turn out the lights? And unlock the back door? But don't let me doze off."

She did as I asked and returned to the cot. Outside, the moon cast its glow across the backyard. "Haven't I read this story before?" she asked after a few moments' silence. "A killer orangutan?"

I nodded in the darkness. "Poe. And you're Annabel Lee. Don't think I didn't make the connection."

"My mother was a romantic."

"Annabel Lee died in the poem."

"That's why I don't use my middle name."

Across the room from us Pedro rattled his bars.

We were both silent for a time. "Are you awake, Sam?" she asked finally.

"Just barely."

"What are we waiting for? Pedro didn't kill that cat."

"Of course not. He might have gotten out of his cage, he might even have opened Sabbath's cage, but he wouldn't have used a cord or wire to strangle her."

"Then who—?"

That was when my eye caught the movement of a flashlight in the Ark's backyard. "There he is!" I whispered urgently. "Come on!"

We were out the back door in an instant, targeting him with my flashlight. "Stop right there!" I shouted.

The man was tall and dressed in black. He dropped his shovel and stood where he was, perhaps fearful that we were armed. A car's headlights swept in from the road as Sheriff Lens appeared from his hiding place.

"But who is he?" Annabel asked. "I've never seen him before."

"You've probably seen him several times since you opened your Ark. You just never noticed him."

Sheriff Lens came running up, puffing a bit. "Is this the fellow I'm supposed to arrest, Doc?"

The tall man turned to me with a slight smile. "Arrest me for what? Trespassing? Cruelty to animals?"

"The theft of your aunt's diamond," I said simply. "Annabel, let me introduce you to Gordon Rawlings. He's your milkman."

An hour later, back at the sheriff's office, I explained it all to Annabel and Sheriff Lens. "It seemed obvious from the beginning that the motive behind the crime had to be something more than the killing of Dora Flagel's cat. If someone wanted to strangle a cat, there are enough stray ones around. Whoever went to the trouble of killing Sabbath in that locked animal hospital had to be after something else."

"But what?" Annabel asked. "And what was this mention of a stolen diamond?"

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"Sabbath belonged to Dora Flagel, and when I spoke to her I learned that she'd lost a valuable diamond from her dinner ring. It seemed to have happened just before her cat took ill. I remembered your telling me, Annabel, that Sabbath was suffering from some sort of blockage. That seemed more than a coincidence. I began to consider the possibility that the Siamese cat had swallowed the diamond, causing the blockage."

Annabel Christie shook her head. "Cats don't swallow diamonds."

"They might if it was inside a bit of cat food." I leaned forward on the sheriff's desk. "Even though two of the prongs holding the diamond on the ring seemed to have been bent open, Mrs. Flagel refused to accept the possibility of robbery. What burglar, she asked, would take the time to remove the diamond from its setting rather than steal the whole ring?"

"She's right there," Sheriff Lens agreed.

"Not entirely. Suppose the thief was a member of her family, someone who frequented the house and had a perfect opportunity to steal the diamond. If the ring itself was left behind, Mrs. Flagel might not notice the missing gem for weeks or months. Remember the thick glasses she wears for her poor eyesight. She told me her nephew cuts the grass and tends to her yard. Certainly he would have been inside the house on these occasions, if only to use the bathroom. I'm speculating, but I think that's what happened last Friday. She must have walked in on him just after he removed the diamond from the ring. He feared she might accuse him and even ask him to empty his pockets. So he fed the diamond to Sabbath with a bit of cat food.

"Before he could return later to retrieve the stone, Sabbath was shipped off to Annabel's Ark with intestinal problems."

"You still haven't told us how you knew who he was," Annabel said. "Or how he killed the cat inside my locked building."

"Knowing family relationships made the first part easy. Dora Flagel has only one sibling, her sister Rose Rawlings. And Rose has only one child, her son Gordon, a milkman. I remembered that Dora's late husband left no relatives. So the nephew who tended to Dora's yard had to be Gordon. I remembered that the Ark fed the cats milk, and it was left in the milk box by the front door. Could that milkman have been Gordon Rawlings? I remembered that Sabbath's cage was opposite the front door, only a few feet away, and the milk box was next to the door. Rose Rawlings told me just the other day that when Gordon was young he used to catch grass snakes using a long pole with a snare at the end. Could such a pole have been used to kill Sabbath? Indeed it could. I noticed your assistant, Ray, pull open the milk-box door yesterday to place an empty bottle there. There was no snap or lock on the inside. Gordon simply opened the outer door, pushing open the

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inner door, and saw Sabbath in her cage. He must have brought the snare or noose with him for just such an eventuality. The snare on the end of the pole could easily be used to pull open the knob on the cage door. Then he looped it around the cat's neck, not to kill her but only to steal her. Sabbath clawed at the cage for a foothold—remember the torn claw?—and hung on. Gordon kept pulling and the cat strangled. He still couldn't get her out, even in death, so he freed the snare, pushed the cage door closed with his pole until the lock clicked, and got out of there."

"How'd he close the inside milk-box door?" the sheriff asked.

"Usually you can grip the edge and swing them shut. It didn't have to be a tight fit."

"And tonight?"

"I knew he'd come back for Sabbath's body. His aunt must have told him it was being buried behind the Ark. I suppose Annabel thought I wanted to watch the orangutan's cage, but I was really watching out the back window for our cat killer to return."

"It still didn't have to be the milkman," Annabel argued. "Anyone could have stuck that pole through the milk box."

"Not during the night when it was dark inside the Ark. It had to have been done shortly after daylight. Remember Sabbath's body was still warm when you found it. Who else could safely tamper with a milk box along that road in the early morning without fear of being noticed? Only a milkman."

After that I went home for a few hours of sleep. When I arrived at the office in early afternoon, Lincoln Jones was chatting with Mary. "How's the pooch?" I asked.

"Fine. Good as new. But you look tired. Have a hard night?"

"I was sitting up with a patient."

"Anyone I know?"

"A fellow named Pedro. He's going home today." ●

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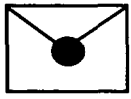

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Art by Allen Davis

Death on the Trans-Mongolian Railway

by Mary Reed and Eric Mayer

Inspector Dorj of the Mongolian police allowed his attention to drift from a small boy lurking a few steps down from his railway compartment and back to the paperbound *Richard III* he'd found at a kiosk in Ulaanbaatar.

"I know you're anxious to get back to your posting at Dalandzadgad, now your holiday's over," Chief Ganbold had told him that morning, proving, thought Dorj, that Ganbold had never visited that cultural backwater in the Gobi. "But there's a job we want you to do first." The chief made a show of handing over a train ticket. "It leaves this afternoon."

"'Hard class,' I see."

"Ah—but it's only an eight-hour journey . . . each way."

Suppressing a smile, the chief had gone on to explain that there

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had been an increasing number of reports of pickpockets and stolen baggage from those traveling on the train. But so far, a very slow half-hour into the journey, the boy—a sturdy, ruddy-cheeked youngster of about nine—had been the only "suspect" to present himself. That is, if a nine-year-old's testing the doors between carriages, peeking wide-eyed into the lavatory, peering into compartments, and experimenting with the samovar dispensing hot water that graced every Mongolian railway car—even "hard class"—could really be called suspicious.

The writing team of Mary Reed and Eric Mayer currently has two series running in *EQMM*. That featuring Mongolian policeman Inspector Dorj has a splendid new entry this month as Dorj tries to solve a whodunit in that most alluring of settings, a long-distance train. Their other series, historical tales set in Constantinople, is about to find new life in a novel. See *One for Sorrow* (Poisoned Pen Press). ‡

Having poked his head into the corridor to watch the boy for a few moments to satisfy himself that his actions were nothing more than youthful curiosity, Dorj adjusted his wire-rimmed spectacles and prepared to plunge back into the Battle of Bosworth Field. Finding the Shakespeare on the way to Ulaanbaatar Station had cheered the theater-loving inspector considerably. Unfortunately, his intent was thwarted when a portly Chinese man abruptly entered the compartment and wedged himself into the vacant seat beside him. It was an odd thing, Dorj thought with a sigh, but it seemed that whenever he took public transportation, perhaps because he was slight of build, he seemed to attract those passengers in need of extra room for elbows and all the rest. Naturally reticent, he also seemed to attract talkers.

"Name's Quinfu," the large Chinese introduced himself in excellent Mongolian. "Taking the train all the way to Moscow?"

Reluctantly, Dorj looked up from his book. "No, unfortunately. I'm only going to the border."

"And what is it takes you to Suhbaatar?"

Dorj, who was traveling "undercover" as Ganbold had grandly described it, groped for an excuse, but could conceive of no reason in the world why any civilized human being would want to travel to Suhbaatar in February.

Inspiration from the play he had been reading came to him. "A horse," he said. "I need a horse."

Seeing Quinfu's puzzlement, Dorj hastily changed the subject. "What takes you to Moscow?"

"Capitalism! Profit! I'm a trader." Quinfu beamed down at him like

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a giant poster of Chairman Mao—albeit an acquisitive Chairman Mao.

"I see," Dorj responded politely.

The inspector was sceptical about the political and economic changes that had overwhelmed his homeland in the past ten years, and not only because they had swept him from a career post in bustling Ulaanbaatar to assignments in districts where the construction of a new stretch of gravel road would be considered headline news, were there a newspaper. The new entrepreneurs' "every man for himself" philosophy struck him as not unlike that of the criminals he had been apprehending for twenty years. Didn't both place their own selfish interests above those of society?

Dorj decided this would be a good time to patrol the train. "Please excuse me." He stood, shoving *Richard III* into his overcoat pocket. "I'm afraid I have to use the lavatory."

"These hard seats are rough on the kidneys," observed Quinfu, too loudly for the inspector's taste.

Dorj picked his way through the bundles and boxes that blocked the corridor, even though this part of the train was only half filled with passengers. Mostly trade goods rather than personal belongings, Dorj suspected. He was glancing around for the boy, who had vanished, when his foot slipped. The elderly Mongolian railway attendant dozing at the other end of the corridor, a copy of the government-sponsored *Ardyn Erkh News* at his feet, woke up and glared at him.

Looking down, Dorj saw water leaking from under the lavatory door. He yanked on the handle, but the door was locked.

"Hold on, dude!" came a voice from inside the cubicle, drawling the foreign word with gusto. A few seconds later, a tall, long-haired Mongolian teenager emerged. Under his open designer jacket he wore a T-shirt adorned with a picture of Chinggis Khaan and the proclamation "The Great Mongol Rules." Long banned by the Communists, Chinggis Khaan was now, naturally, once again a national hero. "I wouldn't go in there, dude." The teenager drawled the peculiar form of address again. "It's not working."

As the youngster brushed past him, Dorj could hear, even above the clatter of the train wheels, an irritating buzz from the headphones attached to the portable CD player hanging from the boy's belt.

It didn't take Dorj long to patrol the Number 3 train. Tourist season was months away, so the old Russian diesel was hauling only half a dozen cars from Beijing—three new German-built cars with deluxe sleeping compartments, followed by a dining car, the aptly named "hard-class" carriage in which Dorj was traveling, and a baggage car, unlocked and, he observed, nearly empty. His

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patrol over, Dorj had just returned to his compartment when the diesel unexpectedly slowed to a stop.

Peering through the grimy window, Dorj examined the industrial wasteland the train had been passing through since leaving Ulaanbaatar. Most of the factories had been abandoned after the Russian withdrawal, but amid the rust and crumbling concrete, a few chimneys still spewed enough coal smoke to hide the brilliant blue Mongolian sky behind a sooty haze.

The compartment door opened and two women in heavy parkas and fur hats stamped heavily in, bringing with them an aura of cold air. They exchanged a few words in Russian.

"Well, look at that!" Dorj recognized the loud voice of the big Chinese trader, who had been absent when he returned to his seat. Quinfu reappeared, carrying a large green bottle labeled "Great Wall Champagne." Settling back into the seat next to Dorj, he continued: "So that's why they're hauling a baggage car with nothing in it but a few fireworks and marmot skins."

Following Quinfu's gaze, Dorj saw a minibus steaming gently on the snow-covered platform. He watched in astonishment as three men—private security guards, judging by their khaki uniforms, which Dorj did not recognize—transferred canvas satchels, obviously full of tugriks, out of the minibus and piled them onto a handcart. Two of the guards then proceeded to haul the cart onto the train. A minute or two later, they passed Dorj's compartment, tracking snow behind them. Dorj peered out into the corridor in time to see them entering the baggage car, accompanied by their colleague.

"I'd guess they'll have that baggage car sealed up tight." The proximity of so much cash seemed to put a quaver in Quinfu's voice. "Must be why it's at the end of the train rather than behind the engine."

It took four trips with the handcart to finish the job. Dorj's consternation grew. Could this unusual shipment be the real reason for his trip north? If so, why hadn't Ganbold informed him?

The third guard, Dorj noticed, carried a Kalishnikov rifle slung over his shoulder. He had a pallid face and a red nose and looked very young.

On his last trip to the baggage car, the guard stopped to fill a Styrofoam cup with hot water from the samovar. Dorj thought him somewhat lacking in application to his duty, given the circumstances. The pudgy, rifle-carrying guard then disappeared into the baggage car, and the elderly attendant was summoned to lock him in.

As soon as the remaining guards disembarked, the train resumed its journey, climbing into the mountains north of the capital, through stands of larch, birch, and poplar. Snow dusted the roofs of the villages in the valleys. The air inside the hard-class com-

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partment was hot, stifling almost, except for an icy undercurrent along the floor. Dorj made one patrol after another, less in hopes of catching any ne'er-do-wells than in a vain attempt to pass the interminable hours and keep some sensation in his freezing feet.

On one visit back to his seat, he found himself deciphering scraps of conversation between the two Russian women who had boarded at the same time as the mysterious money satchels and seemed to know the guard. He needed to keep his Russian from getting rusty, he told himself.

"What a shame about Temujin. Won't they ever understand, it's a disease, not a personal failing?" the older woman said.

"It's the same everywhere now. Absolutely no respect for workers . . . " sniffed her companion, shaking her head in disgust.

"Still, he's better out of the mines. This new job—it's a big responsibility, considering the amount of money involved. Perhaps this job will lead to something permanent."

"Permanent . . . what's permanent anymore?"

Dorj realized they were referring to the armed guard locked in the baggage car with the tugriks.

Dorj's seatmate, Quinfu, passed by again. Ever since the guards had boarded, he had spent as much time away from the compartment as Dorj. It was as if the proximity of so much wealth had made him restless. It had certainly put a gleam in his eye. He nodded to Dorj as he passed. The Mongolian inspector nodded back and then stared aimlessly out of the window, shamelessly eavesdropping on the women's conversation.

"Makes you wonder," the first woman was saying. "Why would anyone choose to ship so much in cash? We have banks."

"Yes, but who owns the banks these days? If your State Property Committee can try to give away the Reconstruction Bank—well, personally, I'd rather have cash in hand."

Dorj suddenly felt extremely tired.

At twilight the train stopped at a village. The platform was thronged. Many of the passengers forced open the windows by their seats, letting in bitterly cold wind gusts laced with snow. Villagers surged forward, breath steaming in the few sputtering arc lights still functioning at the station. Grasping hands reaching from above sought clutching hands reaching from below. Plastic flowers, cheese, clothing moving down passed tugriks on the way up. For a moment, Dorj glimpsed Quinfu on the platform, standing next to a cardboard box filled with bottles and artificial leather jackets made of black plastic, and then he was obscured in the melee, a heavyset warrior on the battlefield of commerce.

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The new world, thought Dorj wearily, as the train finally pulled away from the platform and into the long tunnel of the Mongolian night.

"Join me in the dining car," the returning Quinfu suggested with a grin. "Dinner's on me." He flashed a wad of rumpled tugriks. Dorj declined. The menu, he knew, would probably be limited to sausages and heavily chlorinated bottled water. In anticipation, he had supplied himself with the experienced Mongolian train rider's survival aid, a container of instant noodles. Unfortunately, when he approached the hot-water samovar at the end of the corridor, he found a handwritten notice attached to the metal contraption declaring it to be broken. Dorj questioned the attendant about the breakdown. The man had a nomad's sun-cured skin.

"Can't you read?" he growled. "If you want hot water, you'll have to go to another carriage."

The water in the deluxe-class carriage beyond the deserted dining car was, indeed, boiling hot. Dorj waited while the steaming water transformed the dry husks of noodles in his cup into something almost palatable and then ate his dinner standing up.

He was reentering his own carriage when trouble finally made an appearance. The attendant was sitting half-asleep at his post by the broken samovar. The teenager was coming out of the lavatory again.

And a boy of no more than nine was crouched down amid the bags and boxes in the corridor, his skinny arm up to the elbow in some traveler's basket.

Dorj leapt forward. Even in his youth he had not been much of a sportsman. The boy jumped up as Dorj clambered over the debris in the corridor, and would have escaped if Dorj had not caught his foot and fallen forward, just in time to grab the boy's arm.

As Dorj got to his feet, a deafening explosion rang out.

A gunshot. It was the first thing that came to his mind. Then he remembered the armed guard in the baggage car.

"Police," he shouted, hearing his own voice, muffled, dim behind the ringing in his ears. "I'm a policeman. I need the baggage car unlocked!"

The old attendant was on his feet, and in a moment was fumbling with his key ring at the baggage-car door. In another moment they were inside. The fishy odor of marmot skins assaulted Dorj's nostrils. Then he saw the half-open window and beneath it satchels of tugriks—or those which hadn't been thrown out the window—scattered in disarray. The guard lay on his back in the middle of the floor. A glance at the contorted, discolored face told Dorj the man was dead.

A whimper reminded Dorj that he still had the larcenous boy by the arm. He released his grip. Fearful, the child stared at the dead guard for a second and then bolted.

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Dorj tried to fight back his own fear, a selfish fear, he admitted. His superiors would be outraged. He was going to be in hotter water than any samovar could provide. Was there a posting more remote even than Dalandzadgad? Some barren, roadless, unelectrified expanse of steppe or desert, suitable for a policeman who nabbed nine-year-old petty thieves while grand larceny and murder were being committed thirty feet away?

If he hadn't solved the crime by the time the train arrived at Suhbaatar, the paperbound *Richard III* in his pocket might well be his last glimpse of civilization for a very long time.

"Some kind of fast-acting poison, I'd say. No sign of injury. Certainly no bullet wound." The older Russian woman, Kira, stood up and stepped away from the corpse. As Dorj had just learned, both women were doctors at a hospital in Erdenet. Or had been, until funds ran out. Now, they told him, they were returning to Russia.

"Not that things are much better there," Kira had commented.

"Poor Temujin," lamented the other woman, Marianna. "He was so proud of being selected for this job. It was all he could talk about on the bus."

Kira observed that, given the nature of the job, he had not shown much judgment in talking about it so freely to his fellow minibus passengers, confirming Dorj's impression of the dead man's somewhat casual attitude to his responsibilities.

"Do you have any idea what sort of poison?" Dorj inquired hopefully.

Kira pursed her lips, a frown creasing her forehead. "It reminds me of something . . . but I can't quite recall."

Once he had ordered everyone out of the baggage car, it did not take Dorj long to perform an inventory. The car was practically empty, its floor bare except for a few puddles of melted snow. Apart from the tugriks, there were only a few bundles of marmot skins piled haphazardly against the back wall—on the way to some Russian clothing factory, no doubt—and several cartons of "Chinggis Khaan" fireworks, probably destined for eventual sale in Suhbaatar for its residents' celebration of Naadam. To Dorj, summer and that national festival seemed far away. In one corner, the guard's crumpled Styrofoam cup. Nearby, one of the fireworks boxes had been opened. Surely none of the dead guard's colleagues had been pilfering?

Dorj was thankful that one thing, at least, became immediately obvious when his inspection of the guard's rifle revealed it had not been fired.

A few moments later, he confronted the teenager, discovered lounging in the otherwise deserted dining car, lost in the faint buzz of

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modern music emanating from his headphones. At first the young man was sullen and uncooperative, a fact Dorj discounted, having observed that teenagers habitually acted like guilty suspects.

"There's no point denying you did it. I saw you coming out of the lavatory just before this went off." Dorj held in his palm the acrid, singed remnant of a firecracker, whose explosion the lavatory had amplified into a gunshot.

"So what's your point, dude? I mean, is it a crime or something to set off a firecracker?"

"Vandalism is a crime, and so is stealing." Dorj frowned at the youngster. "But what I'm really interested in is what you were doing in the baggage car."

The teenager shrugged. "Just exploring. It was open. Till they locked the stiff in with the cash, anyhow."

Dorj requested the youngster's name.

"Mongke."

Dorj studied him, resisting an impulse to tell him to sit up straight. Mongke had exchanged the designer jacket he'd worn earlier for one of the so-called leather jackets Quinfu had been selling. The inspector asked him about the CD player.

Mongke looked hurt. "I didn't steal it," he protested. "I bought it in Chicago, in America. I was visiting my cousins. But you can get them in Ulaanbaatar too. There's a shop in the third microdistrict. If you can afford it."

Dorj thought that any price would be too high for listening to whatever it was that so enthralled Mongke. He gleaned that the teenager was en route to Novosibirsk, where he was intending to go to university.

Unfortunately, the teenager hadn't noticed much about the baggage car, except for the fireworks.

"Did you take anything into the car with you?" Dorj asked, grasping at straws.

Mongke gave him a scornful look. "You think maybe I poisoned him?"

"Who said he was poisoned?"

"Those Russian doctors I overheard you talking to, dude."

Dorj summoned the Russian doctors for further interview, having commandeered one of the deluxe compartments to ensure that at least some of his questioning would go unheard. They were able to supply Dorj with a fair amount of information. Not necessarily because they were more observant, but because the dead security guard, Temujin, had more or less told them his life story on the minibus to the station—practically to its end, as it turned out.

"Yes," confirmed Marianna in response to Dorj's questioning, "he seemed like a friendly person."

"Even though," the more severe-looking Kira added from her

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perch on the bed, "we'd never met him before he got on the minibus in Erdenet. He was very talkative."

As the doctors recounted their conversation with Temujin, Dorj was less enthralled than Marianna seemed to be by the tale of the guard's impoverished childhood. He was more interested in what Kira told him about Temujin's losing his job at the Erdenet copper mine because of drunkenness.

"It's a treatable disease," insisted Marianna. And so, she continued, it seemed unexpected good fortune when the jobless Temujin was approached to guard a shipment of tugriks. Or at least it had seemed like good fortune until just recently.

"Did he say how large this shipment was?"

"I don't recall exactly." Marianna frowned. "Millions and millions was what he said."

"And what about the two guards who loaded the tugriks on the train? Did they have anything to say?"

Kira shook her head. "They stayed at the back of the bus, guarding the money."

As Dorj got up to show the women out, he couldn't help remarking that the deluxe compartment even had its own shower.

Kira laughed. "Our future in Moscow might be bleak, but we're going there in style." She pulled a bottle out from the bedding. "They even supply you with champagne!"

Dorj paced back through the train, no longer on patrol, but simply to be on his feet, to think. There were no lights to be seen outside, though the train, he knew, must be passing the occasional isolated house or even entire villages. In Ulaanbaatar, it was no longer possible to keep all the traffic lights working. In the countryside, the whole electric grid was failing.

The inspector had immediately alerted the authorities by radio. They seemed more concerned with recovering the vanished tugriks than in Temujin's body. Already, police were descending on various points along the railway line. If the satchels had not been handed out the window at the last stop, they must have been thrown out along the way. The train would, of course, be met when it arrived at Suhbaatar.

Dorj was distressed by his superiors' priorities, but at least it gave him time to solve the mystery of the guard's death inside the locked carriage. Had Temujin been poisoned before or after he entered?

When the inspector returned to the hard-class carriage, the old attendant was muttering to himself behind his paper. Murder had apparently awakened his interest for a while, although not enough to interfere with his reading.

"Do you have a moment?"

The attendant let the paper drop to the floor.

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Dorj ascertained that the man's name was Badral. Again Dorj noted the weathered face of the nomadic herder. "How do you come to be working on a train after a lifetime on the steppes?"

Badral grunted, not impressed by Dorj's powers of deduction. "Everyone said life would be easier in the city. I sold the last of my yaks for the official registration fee—twenty-six thousand tugriks, it's a scandal—and moved my *ger* to Ulaanbaatar. They said I'd have everything I needed. Instead, the tents were one on top of another. And then the area bath house closed. Once a week I went to a friend of a relative, just for a shower. And this was the best job I could find." He stared down at the government newspaper on the floor.

Dorj thought the old man fortunate to have found any job, considering the unemployment in the cities, but didn't say so. Instead he asked if the attendant had known the murdered man. Badral shook his head, apparently unwilling to waste words on anything other than his own hardship.

Dorj nodded towards the hot-water samovar. "Didn't I see Temujin over here getting water just before he was locked in the baggage car?"

Badral shrugged.

Dorj filled one of the Styrofoam cups by the samovar. The water was clear. Nor could he detect any suspicious odor.

"Go ahead and try it," suggested Badral.

Dorj was saved by the sudden arrival of Quinfu, who barged in from the dining car, clutching two bottles and a black plastic jacket. "Ah, Inspector," he boomed, "are you still in the market for a horse? I have a deal for you!"

Dorj stared at him.

"Just joking," grinned Quinfu. "Now, I expect, you'll be wanting to question me?"

"I was wondering what you'd sell that jacket for?" Dorj found himself asking.

Quinfu looked hopeful, then quoted a price which made the inspector wince. "But I could give you a discount," Quinfu added.

Dorj politely refused.

Quinfu, evidently a man of lively curiosity and great imagination, noticed the cup of water in Dorj's hand. He immediately asked Dorj if he thought someone had poisoned the guard. Lowering his voice, something Dorj had not imagined possible, he helpfully added: "If it was a slow-acting poison, it could have been administered before he ever boarded the train, you know."

"True enough, but that doesn't really narrow it down much. What interests me more is what you were doing in the baggage car before it was locked up?"

The trader looked offended. "Me?"

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"You told me what was in it, remember, while the money was being loaded."

Quinfu looked thoughtful. "I don't want to endanger my business interests," he admitted finally, "but I don't want you suspecting me of murder, either. The truth is, the border authorities aren't always receptive to progressive economic ideas."

"You mean you're a smuggler?"

Quinfu nodded unhappily. "So, as you will doubtless understand, I find it prudent to keep my inventory decentralized. A jacket under this seat, a bottle in that compartment. Attracts less attention. I stashed three bottles of champagne in the baggage car, behind those boxes of fireworks. And one in a deluxe compartment. A nice touch that was, I thought," he concluded modestly.

"I appreciate your honesty," Dorj said. "But if you hid three bottles in the baggage car, why didn't I see them just now?"

"You mean someone's stolen them? This is an outrage!"

Dorj, now in possession of the key, escorted the trader to the baggage car, where the big man stepped gingerly around Temujin's corpse and peered behind the boxes of fireworks. He looked at Dorj in consternation.

"They're gone!"

Dorj scanned the car again, noting the open window, the boxes of fireworks, the scattered satchels of tugriks, the bundled marmot skins piled lumpily at the back wall. A quick check behind them, and, one by one, he fished out three empty "Great Wall Champagne" bottles.

"He drank all my champagne and hid the bottles," groaned Quinfu.

Alarmed, Dorj mentioned the bottle Kira had found in the deluxe compartment.

"Don't worry," Quinfu assured him. "He didn't die from drinking my champagne. I—uh—tested some myself. It isn't that bad."

Nevertheless, Dorj resolved to have the bottles tested, along with the water in the samovar, when the train reached Suhbaatar.

That, he realized unhappily, would not be long now.

And what did he know, he wondered a few minutes later. He had returned to the dining car, which was temporarily deserted. The teenager, Mongke, had decided to listen to his music elsewhere.

Looking toward the window, toward the darkness beyond, he saw only his own reflection in the glass. He attempted to compartmentalize what he'd learned. There were, of course, two crimes involved. Theft as well as murder. The latter must have arisen from the former. Who might want to steal the tugriks? Quinfu, of course, with his obvious attraction to money.

But then there was the teenager, Mongke, who, judging from his CD player and designer clothes, had expensive tastes for a

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Mongolian youngster. And what about Badral, the carriage attendant? He hadn't found the good life he had been promised when he moved to Ulaanbaatar. In his bitterness and disappointment could he have turned to crime? Even the two Russian doctors, though highly trained, faced an uncertain future, given the state of the Russian economy.

All of them, he concluded, appeared to have a motive for robbery. And so, in fact, might dozens of other passengers he hadn't even interviewed. By limiting his investigation to a handful of people he felt he had reason to suspect, Dorj was not following proper procedure. When the train reached Suhbaatar the authorities would want to know why he had not been taking down the names and addresses of all the train passengers for later interviewing. Would he have to admit he'd taken a gamble on finding the culprit or culprits quickly, to save his career?

The repetitive clatter of wheels over rails, drawing him relentlessly nearer to Suhbaatar, intruded into his consciousness, as his heartbeat sometimes did in the dead of night. He tried to gather his thoughts.

First, who might have assisted in the robbery? Quinfu's business depended upon inside knowledge about what was going on in what he called the "new economy," and he was doubtless familiar with the train from journeying up and down with his goods. Although not as familiar as Badral, the attendant. And the doctors seemed to know more about the shipment than even an irresponsible guard would have revealed to them.

So, what about the murder? Who would want Temujin dead? Who else but an accomplice who didn't want to share the tugriks?

But, on the other hand, who had had the opportunity to poison him? Mongke and Quinfu had both admitted to having been inside the baggage car before it was locked. On the other hand, Badral had had the key and could have tampered with the samovar more easily than the others. As for the doctors—who would know more about poisons?

Dorj was dismayed. His head ached and he had heartburn. Perhaps the instant noodles he had eaten had not agreed with him. He wished those were his only problems. There were too many possibilities, he thought, and he knew too little. Given the circumstances, it was impossible to immediately investigate his suspects' stories, yet Dorj knew he could be certain of nothing he had not personally confirmed.

It was that thought that sent Dorj hastily back to the baggage car. Grabbing one of the tugrik satchels lying under the open window, he undid snaps and pulled open the heavy zipper. Inside was nothing but wads of newspaper. His heartburn worsened.

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"This is really bogus, dude," complained Mongke, after Dorj had politely, but officially, invited his small group of suspects to the dining car.

"I didn't ask you all here to create a scene," said Dorj, who, for all his love of the theater, had never fancied himself an actor. He did not relish addressing even this small an audience. "Since you've all taken an interest in the poor man's death, even if only because I've questioned you about it, you're all entitled to know how it happened.

"I've been guilty of allowing my expectations to provide what I did not see," he told them. "For instance, I observed Temujin drawing water from the samovar, so I assumed the samovar might have been poisoned."

The old attendant muttered something under his breath.

Dorj ignored him. "Worse, I also assumed that the satchels loaded so carefully actually had money in them. They did not."

Over expressions of surprise and disbelief, Dorj assured them it was so.

"But why hire Temujin to guard such things, to get himself killed for nothing?" Marianna demanded, "Why lie to him?"

"You might equally ask why anyone would ship so much money on a train that's known to be plagued by crime, or why anyone would hire a known drunkard as a security guard. But what if the shipment was a decoy? The tugriks are most probably traveling to their destination on an inconspicuous jeep right now. They knew Temujin was unreliable. Counted on it. In fact, they relied on his talking too much, to divert attention. And notice, he wasn't told exactly what concern he was working for."

"So he double-crossed the people he worked for and threw the money out the window?" Quinfu inquired.

"But there's no doubt Temujin was poisoned," pointed out Kira.

"Temujin was poisoned," nodded Dorj, "but, again, I assumed some of the satchels were thrown out. They weren't. I think Temujin opened the window for another reason. It may be that when the poison began to take effect he felt faint, couldn't breathe. Temujin pushed the satchels out of the way, trying to reach the window, trying to let some air into the baggage car. By the time he got the window open, it was too late. He collapsed and died."

Marianna looked upset. "But how was he poisoned?"

"The open window gave me a clue. Of course, we'll never know exactly what went through Temujin's mind in his last moments. No doubt he was confused. His first reaction, as he suffocated, may have been to get air into the car. Remember, he was locked in, so he couldn't have let himself out. But what if he also wanted to let something out?"

"Wait a minute, I remember where I saw something like this before," interrupted Kira. "Do you remember, Marianna, those

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workers brought into the emergency department from the pesticide factory a few years back?"

"Isn't it true," asked Dorj, beating Marianna to it, "that certain poisons can form as a result of a chemical reaction with water? It came to me when I remembered adding hot water to the instant noodles I had for dinner." He did not mention that it was his heartburn which had reminded him of his dinner.

"That's what happened at the factory. A bin of pesticide was somehow exposed to moisture. What was it, again? Calcium phosphide, that was it. It's really dangerous stuff. Get it wet, it gives off phosphine gas. And even in small doses, it can be fatal."

Dorj nodded. "And I believe that calcium phosphide is used in fireworks as well. Mongke opened the box to steal a firecracker. Toxic gas formed when the fireworks became wet. Does phosphine have a fishy odor? When I entered the baggage car the first time, the gas hadn't totally dispersed out the window. I smelled what I thought were the marmot skins."

"But who would want to poison him?" wondered Marianna.

"No one poisoned him. Temujin was a drunkard. He found three bottles of champagne hidden in the baggage car and drank them. But, locked in there for hours . . . well, I don't think I have to be graphic, do I?"

"You mean he answered nature's call and it was his last one?" Quinfu put in helpfully.

"Oh, how awful. So . . . undignified," Marianna said quietly.

Mongke shook his head. "Awesome."

Through the windows Dorj could see lights for the first time in hours. The train was approaching Suhbaatar.

"So no crimes were actually committed, apart from attempted robbery?" Quinfu, the smuggler, sounded hopeful.

Dorj, who had been caught out in one lie that day, said nothing. He left the dining car and walked back to the hard-class compartment to meet the railway officials and police, who would be boarding momentarily.

He supposed Quinfu was guilty of something, but to Dorj the new economic system was a mystery. At what point did extremely shrewd dealing become crime? As for Mongke's stealing a firecracker to set off in a lavatory—well, he didn't suppose the authorities needed to add to the prison population that badly. He had, however, neglected to scold the nine-year-old thief. In fact, he realized, he had not even ascertained the child's name.

At the thought, his hand went to the pocket of his overcoat. His paperbound *Richard III* was gone. The child had apparently taken his opportunity to pick his pocket in the baggage car.

Dorj laughed softly. He knew the play more or less by heart anyway. Let the young dude read about a real villain. ●

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In the Middle of Nowhere

by Donald Olson

Dewey began to sulk when Jake refused to stop at a sign advertising, among other attractions, alligator wrestling and a monkey jungle.

"Pa would've stopped," the boy grumbled, thrusting his feet forward to get comfortable. At sixteen he was all arms and legs.

"Will you please stop kicking the seat?" Ruthie, his mother, spoke without looking around, her eyes on the long, straight, swamp-bordered road ahead.

"I'm not! There ain't no room for my legs."

"Too bad. You're the one wanted to sit in back."

"No time for sightseein', sport," said Jake Ensign. "Gotta reach Bolivar by sunset." Bolivar being only two miles east of the prison.

By our count, the following story makes the 81st publication for Donald Olson in *EQMM*. He first saw print in this magazine in 1969, and he has averaged three stories per year for us ever since. Only a tiny handful of authors have graced our pages that frequently. It will be obvious to anyone reading this author's work why we keep welcoming him back: He writes a good old-fashioned twist-in-the-tail story with elegance and style.

Aslant the tops of endless pines and palmetto, the southern sun burned hotly through the bug-spattered windshield, grazing the dark-rooted crown of Ruthie's blond hair and picking out red highlights in Jake Ensign's ponytailed mane. Wiry and well-muscled, he had the sun-seared look of a farmer or perhaps a sailor, which among other things he'd been, or so he said, before showing up at the ranch, if the place could be dignified with that name, looking for work. Ruthie had taken him in—this was about two years after Homer Jessup had gone to prison—and in the course of time had taken him into her bed.

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Dewey went back to trying to solve the pocket puzzle game he'd brought along to amuse himself, the object of which was to arrange colored squares in a certain pattern without lifting them from the box. It was called "Instant Insanity."

The game failed to distract his thoughts from what lay ahead, although he still clung fast to the hope that he was wrong, that what he'd overheard the night he'd lain in bed listening to the wind lashing the palm leaves and watching the shadows sweep across the ceiling, remnant of a hurricane far to the south, was no more than a waking dream.

Ordinarily they would not have kept him from sleep, those restless fugitive shadows forming and re-forming on the ceiling above his head, invading the room and his imagination like the scary figures advancing across a dark landscape in *Night of the Living Dead,* the movie he'd watched on TV before bedtime. At one point he'd got up and looked out the window as if to make sure no zombielike creatures were stealing toward the house, casting their shadows before them.

He'd opened his door and padded down the hall toward the bathroom, surprised to see a light still on in his mother's room. The door was open a slit and Dewey crept closer, drawn by the half-ashamed prurient curiosity of a teenager still grappling to understand why his mother should be sharing her room with a drifter who by rights should be sleeping in the spare room off the kitchen. Dewey felt only a mild contempt for their stupidity in thinking he didn't know what was going on. He was glad it would all end when Pa got home.

Holding his breath, he'd paused outside the door, listening to the low murmur of their voices. Their words were not always clear, but he soon realized it was not love talk.

"You'll be drivin'," he heard Jake say. "You wanna stop, you stop. What can he say? Anyway, he should be asleep by then if that dope does the trick. He won't know what hit him."

Dewey's heart grew suddenly as still as his breath. What did Jake mean? Who were they talking about?

Ruthie's reply was inaudible but seemed to provoke a note of impatience in Jake's voice. "How the hell can you miss me? We timed the whole thing. You'll see my flashlight when you're two hundred miles out of Bolivar. You switch on your high beams and slow down. Even if he happens to be awake and tells you not to stop, you'll have no choice. I'll be right in the middle of the damn road."

". . . sure Dewey won't know it's you?"

Muted laughter from Jake. "With the ski mask over my puss? Don't be dumb. It'll be over in a flash. I open the door. Bang bang and I'm outa there."

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A note of protest in Ruthie's voice, the words muffled, and then from Jake: "At that time of night? In the middle of nowhere? Nobody's gonna see nothin'."

". . . wish he didn't have to see it, the way he feels about his pa."

"Sugar, like I said, a kid's the perfect witness. He'll get over it. Hell, we'll get him a dirt bike, a pony, a swimmin' pool. Sky's the limit once the insurance company pays up. Quit worryin'. Go to sleep."

Was it a waking dream? No more real than those shadow creatures wafting across the ceiling? When morning came it seemed to Dewey it must be so, for to believe otherwise was to distrust everything he'd ever taken for granted, from the reality of his mother's love to the very shape and substance of the universe. By the time the day of Pa's parole arrived and they were preparing to leave for the prison, he'd all but convinced himself his ears had played a trick on him.

They left shortly after dawn for the ten-hour drive to Bolivar. Before leaving the house, Dewey reached under his pillow and put Pa's wallet in his back pocket. "Keep this for me, son," Pa had said. "Won't be needin' it where I'm going."

Every night before going to sleep Dewey looked at the little album of snapshots in the wallet: Gram who was now dead, Ma laughing into the camera, Pa with his arm around Dewey's shoulder. The wallet had become the most precious of Dewey's keepsakes.

Jake carried a green plastic bag. His "emergency kit," he called it with a chuckle, in case of car trouble. Ruthie brought along a packet of peanut butter sandwiches and a bucket of Kentucky Fried so they could drive straight through without stopping.

The car's air conditioner didn't work and by midday, even with all the windows open, the furnacelike heat dulled the senses. Shortly after they'd eaten, Dewey drifted off into sleep, the words he'd overheard in the night as challenging to the brain as the colored squares of "Instant Insanity" but now as hard to recapture as the fading memory of a bad dream in the hard light of day. When he awoke the sun was still high in the sky.

"We there yet?" he asked.

"Well, look who's back in the land of the living," said Ruthie. When she turned to smile at Dewey the sun seemed to undo the work of all that makeup, revealing the signs of aging it was supposed to hide. She'd said she wanted to look pretty for Homer.

"Ain't we almost to that place?" Dewey asked. Never once had he spoken the word prison; it was always "that place."

Jake said they wouldn't get there before dark. "Your pa's meetin' you all in Bolivar."

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"At the Bluejay Cafe," Ruthie said. "We'll have a bite there before heading home."

With a trace of cautious expectation, more a statement of faith than a question, Dewey said, "He won't never have to go back to that place, will he?"

"Not if he stays clean," replied Jake.

"Pa's never been *dirty,*" Dewey retorted.

"Yeah? Then how come he's inside?"

"Oh, don't start, you two," said Ruthie wearily.

"He was set up. He never wanted to keep that stuff at the mill. They said they'd burn it down less'n he done like they said."

"He broke the law," said Jake. "That makes him a criminal." Then with a snicker of conceit he added: "I may be an outlaw, but he's a criminal."

"What's the difference?"

"I got no rap sheet, sport. I never even been fingerprinted. I mighta *bent* the law now an' then, but I ain't never broke it."

Says you, thought Dewey darkly. It could not be said that he had actively disliked Jake Ensign from the day he'd arrived at the ranch, and he'd been careful to display no hint of animosity when it became clear to him that Jake had become more than a mere boarder. Dewey was not a particularly quiet boy, yet he guarded his thoughts as if each one were a secret you were trying to pry out of him. The only hint he'd given of how he felt about Jake, soon after the boarder had begun sleeping in Ruthie's room, was to refuse his mother's request that Dewey call Ensign "Uncle Jake."

"He ain't my uncle. I got no uncles."

"But it would please Jake, I know it would."

"He ain't my uncle." No more had been said about it.

Soon after they passed a mileage sign reading "Bolivar 200" Jake pulled off the road and stopped the car. It was a wildly desolate stretch, pine trees growing thickly beyond a broad ditch. Jake removed the keys, got out of the car, and unlocked the trunk. Carrying his "emergency kit" he came around to Ruthie's side of the car.

"See you all back at the house," he said.

"Be careful," she replied. Their eyes held until he abruptly turned away.

Ruthie slid over into the driver's seat and took her glasses from her bag. Without them she could hardly see ten feet in front of her.

"What's going on?" Dewey asked as Ruthie drove away.

"Nothing," she said lightly. "Jake only came along so we wouldn't have to drive through all that dismal swampland alone.

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But he thought it best just you and me were there when your pa comes out. He'll hitch a ride back to the ranch."

Dewey felt neither alarm nor anger nor disappointment but only a crushing sense of betrayal and despair as he looked back at Jake standing beside the road clutching that plastic bag. Emergency kit! What did it really hold? A change of clothes? Ski mask? Flashlight? A gun?

As clearly defined as that flock of birds circling over Jake's diminishing figure, the words Dewey had overheard that windy night outside his mother's bedroom door assumed now a direful, unmistakable clarity, neither a dream nor a figment of imagination.

It was going to happen. At some hour before dawn, in the middle of nowhere.

He said nothing, harboring that secret knowledge. Dewey might never become a man of thought, yet he had even now an uncannily mature capacity to foresee the consequences of certain actions. If he told her what he knew they planned to do, his mother would deny everything, of that he had no doubt, telling him, as she often did, that he was "talking through his hat," or dreamed it all, or made it all up because he'd taken a dislike to Jake. Of course she would be forced to abandon the scheme, would have no other choice, but what would happen later? Next week, next month, some time in the near or distant future? Would Pa ever be safe? Would he himself? Would Jake Ensign simply vanish from their lives?

"Pa knows about Jake, don't he?" he asked, as if she might read his true thoughts unless he hid them behind words.

"Knows about him? Of course he knows about him."

"I mean . . . well, that you like Jake a lot."

Ruthie shot him a quick, probing look. "Jake was a godsend. I don't know what we would've done without him. Not many guys are willing to work for just room and board. That's why I had to be nice to him. Especially nice. Or else he wouldn't have hung around. When you grow up you'll understand what I'm saying."

You think I don't? he thought scornfully. "But when Pa gets home we won't need Jake no more. He'll go away, won't he?"

"Well, that depends."

"Jake's wrong. Pa's not a crook."

"Maybe not, but he was a fool. And now the mill's gone. We'll lose the ranch, too. Everything. Them money-sucking lawyers have ruined us. Your pa should've thought of us, what would happen to us."

The words of a stranger, of a woman he no longer knew, perhaps had never known.

The sun was setting as they drove into Bolivar, a dinky, dusty

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town populated mostly by prison employees, shopkeepers, and families who had been rooted there forever.

Homer Jessup was waiting for them, hunched over a cup of coffee at a corner table in the Bluejay Cafe. Except for him and a skinny, red-headed waitress behind the counter, the place was empty. On the radio, Tammy Wynette was singing about a love gone wrong.

Homer smiled his familiar lopsided smile as he rose to meet them. To Dewey he looked the same, only different. Maybe it was the ill-fitting suit, but he seemed thinner in face and body, his dark hair cut short and rimmed with gray.

He gave Ruthie a hug and kiss and then pulled Dewey hard against him.

"Better eat something now before we start home. God, I can't wait to sleep in my own bed."

Dewey thought of Jake Ensign sleeping in the bed where only Pa had a right to sleep. The joy of reunion faded.

They all sat down, ordered burgers and coffee and a strawberry shake for Dewey. Ruthie kept looking around her, but Dewey couldn't take his eyes off his father. Earlier he'd thought of all the things he wanted to say to him; now he could only sit and stare and think of what lay ahead, the long dark road and Jake Ensign waiting in the pine woods. It wasn't going to happen, of course. It was unthinkable, crazy. The three of them would go home and it would be as if the bad times had never been.

Ruthie's false brightness of manner deserted her at the table. Homer had to force the conversation.

"You look tired," he said. "It's been rough for you."

"No picnic, that's for sure."

"This guy you hired, what was his name? He still there?"

"Jake Ensign? Yes. Well, I couldn't just send him packin' now he's no longer needed. I knew you'd want to thank him."

"Sounds a good sort from what you wrote."

"He's an outlaw," said Dewey. "He said so himself. He said you're a criminal but he's an outlaw."

Homer looked at Ruthie. She reddened and forced a laugh.

"He was pulling your leg, you know that."

"Yeah, really," muttered Dewey, slurping the rest of his milkshake.

"Don't worry," said Homer. "Things'll work out. I'll find a job."

Ruthie shrugged. "Who's worried? I'm all worried out."

She picked up Homer's cup and carried it to the counter for a refill, as if it were a Burger King where you fetched your own drinks. Dewey followed her with his eyes. Did she slip something into the cup? He thought she did but couldn't be certain.

"Thanks, but I'm all coffeed out," laughed Homer.

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"Drink it. I don't want you falling asleep on me on the way back. It'll be boring enough as it is. Nothing to see in the dark."

Homer drank the coffee and they left. Dewey climbed into the backseat. Behind the wheel, Ruthie kept looking around as if she'd lost something. "Where the hell are my glasses?"

"You left 'em on the dashboard," said Dewey.

"I *know* where I left them. They're not here."

"Look on the floor."

Several minutes passed while Ruthie and Homer searched for the glasses inside and outside the car. Ruthie carried on as if it were the car keys gone missing and they were to be stranded there all night.

"Somebody must've swiped 'em," said Dewey. "You didn't lock the car."

"Don't be silly. Why would anyone swipe my glasses?"

But there seemed no other explanation. She looked at Homer. "I can't see to drive without them."

"I got no license," said Homer. He turned to look at Dewey. "You got your permit with you, son?"

"You mean I can drive?"

"No!" cried Ruthie. "He's not used to night driving. My glasses have to be here. They didn't just walk away." Once more she started a frantic search.

"I told you," said Dewey. "Somebody walked away with 'em."

"Dewey's a good driver," Homer said. "I taught him myself."

Ruthie sat for a moment as if in deep thought, then got out and walked around to the passenger seat while Dewey took his place behind the wheel and Homer crawled in back.

"Now keep your eyes on the road, and don't drive too fast," Ruthie said.

"I *know* how to drive."

For miles after that they rode in silence. They might have been three strangers who had commandeered a car to escape from some natural disaster and now, each trapped in his own thoughts or dreams or fears, found even small talk too great an effort. Occasionally glancing at his father in the rearview mirror, Dewey presently saw Homer's head begin to droop and then snap back and finally subside against the back of the seat.

They had crossed three county lines before Dewey spoke. "If we take the back road to Chiverton we'll save time."

"Forget it. We'll stick to the main road. Not getting drowsy, are you?"

"No, but Pa is. I think he's asleep."

Ruthie glanced back. "Just as well. He looked pretty burnt out."

"You think Jake's back at the ranch by now?"

"With any luck."

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"I hope not," Dewey said. "I hope he's long gone."

"What a snotty thing to say. I thought you liked Jake."

"He was okay . . . at first."

"If you mean what I think you mean, I can only say you're too wet behind the ears to understand a lot of things. You'd better hope Jake's willing to stick around. Not that we all wouldn't be better off somewhere else. I always hated that godforsaken so-called ranch."

Dewey's left hand dropped from the wheel. He felt the shape of his mother's glasses in his pocket. Hiding them had not been a consciously premeditated act, only a sudden impulse prompted by a vague hope that, being obliged to drive the car, he could somehow bring them safely home, if not by taking a different route then by speeding past that lonesome stretch of pine woods and leaving Jake Ensign far behind them.

Ruthie checked the mileage gauge when they were only a short distance from where they'd left Jake off. She glanced at her watch. "Dewey, slow down."

"Why? I'm not over the limit."

"I think there's something up ahead. Maybe an accident. Flash your high beams."

At first all that was visible was a tiny moving light in the near distance. How could she have seen it? Dewey thought, and the answer filled him with rage as he realized how precisely, by time and mileage, they had calculated the encounter. The phrase "cold-blooded murder" crossed his mind.

The man was visible now as a shadowy form, appearing to move toward them like those shadow figures on the ceiling during the night of the big wind. Soon the headlights etched the figure clearly against the wall of darkness, its arms signaling them to stop.

"Slow down!" screamed Ruthie, grabbing at Dewey's arm locked on the steering wheel. "There must have been an accident. Someone needs help!"

Dewey jammed his foot hard upon the gas pedal, flooring it, the car plunging forward as if rocket-propelled.

"Stop!" cried Ruthie. "You'll hit him!"

"Can't. Pedal's stuck."

"Turn the wheel! Oh, *God!*"

She was still screaming as the car slammed into Jake Ensign's suddenly frozen figure, his body skating across the hood and then seeming to sail into space.

With a screech of brakes, Dewey stopped the car. Ruthie was already out the door and racing toward the shattered body lying on the shoulder. Dewey caught her by the arm before she reached it.

"Ma, get back in the car!"

"Let go of me! Let *go!*"

He dragged her, screaming and fighting, back to the car and

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shoved her into the seat, slamming the door on her. Driven not by panic but by a sense of urgency and purpose, he ran back to the lifeless figure and did what he knew, had perhaps always known, without being conscious of it, must be done.

Stripping the bloody ski mask from the dead man's head, he gazed at the ruined face and broken body of someone he might never have known, an anonymous hitchhiker killed by a hit-and-run driver. He took from the body what had to be taken and left in its place what he'd cherished for four long years.

Ruthie had retreated into a comalike state of silence as they waited in the early hours of dawn for the ringing of the phone or the knock at the door. The spiraling passion and anger had spun itself out like a small tornado passing over them and vanishing as the sun rose over a household in ruins. In the end they'd had no choice, short of sacrificing their son's future, but to do what Dewey had so quietly insisted must be done.

"It's crazy," Homer had railed at him. "Impossible. They'll never believe it."

"Sure they will, Pa. Why not? They'll find your wallet in his pocket where I put it. Soon's they find him in the ditch they'll come here. Ma will identify the body, say it's yours. You said you didn't tell anyone at that place we were picking you up. That waitress in the cafe, she don't know who we were. We'll tell them you were planning to thumb your way home."

Homer gazed at the boy in a daze of wonder and horror, of disbelief and painful affection. "We'll never get away with it. It just won't *work.*"

"You wanna bet?" Dewey's face shone with the smug, superior optimism of the very young. "Long as you hide out here at the ranch till everything's settled. Soon's we get that insurance money we can clear out, go somewhere far away."

Ruthie seemed no longer to be listening, no longer even present, as if she were already far away, still back there in the middle of nowhere, possibly never to return.

Dewey looked at her and smiled. "When we get the money the sky's the limit, eh, Ma? Maybe I can get a dirt bike, or a pony, or even a swimmin' pool." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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A Slow Way To Di

by Robert Barnard

"A dedicated puzzlesmith in the classical vein, Barnard brings elements of humor, particularly political and social satire, to his work, which gives his novels and short stories a decidedly modern edge," wrote William L. DeAndrea in *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*. Social satire is clearly present in Robert Barnard's new story for *EQMM*, in which he makes extraordinarily clever use of real events.

There was no question about when the wedding day would be: It had to be July 29th, 1981. Both David and Julia were agreed about that—had hardly, indeed, needed to discuss it. And when the vicar demurred they presented a united front.

"But nobody will turn up," he protested.

"Oh, but they will," they chorused.

"Everyone wants to watch the royal wedding," he countered (he wanted to watch it himself). "You'll find that a lot of the guests will simply stay away, or trump up an excuse."

"They won't, because they'll want to watch it on the giant screen at the reception," David said complacently. "That's going to be the big pulling point. Oh, and we want the wedding early— nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock?"

"That's right. Then the reception can start round about ten, and we can follow the day through. Oh, people will come, all right: Two weddings for the price of one."

The vicar did not like it at all, but his congregation at St. Michael's included all too few young people, so he was unwilling to antagonise two of them. And he certainly had to admit afterwards that he had been wrong. So many near-friends and business contacts angled for invitations that in the end Julia's father was persuaded to hire a second marquee. Even the vicar was cajoled into watching the coach procession to St. Paul's with David and Julia and their guests, though he was steadfast in his determination to slip away and watch the actual service in the more dignified privacy of his vicarage.

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Julia made a pretty bride. Not lovely, not stunning—but then, she was not going into this in a spirit of competition. She could sit in the central position at top table and watch the nation's bride and her heart would seem to stop at the beauty of her, just as everyone else's did. Somehow she seemed herself to be part of that beauty. David was, if anything, rather better-looking than the Prince of Wales, but who bothered to look at the bridegroom at a wedding? The age difference between him and Julia was only eight years, but the fact that there was one, and that people commented on it, made a further bond between them and the royal couple.

That bond had been formed when David had proposed to Julia on a brief holiday in Brighton. They had got back to their hotel, holding hands and very happy, to find that the royal engagement had been officially announced to the nation. "They can't be any happier than we are," said David as they sat on the bed and watched the TV screen. The bond was further strengthened at the reception when the best man, taking advantage of one of the hiatuses in the television coverage when nothing much was happening, talked (his speech somewhat slurred) of "the nation's sweetheart" and "the queen of our hearts here in Beckersley." Bonds—that was what that day was all about: forming bonds.

That night, which was admittedly no first for them, David rolled over on the bed and said:

"It couldn't have been more wonderful. Everything was perfect. I hope it's been just as good for *them.*"

No one could deny they made a lovely couple. The congregation of St. Michael's all said so, and so did their colleagues at their respective workplaces. Quite soon they became something special in the small town of Beckersley. They were people who were pointed to, with an odd sort of pride. When the marriage was blessed with children, people's happiness was in an indefinable way crowned, and they smiled knowingly. It didn't matter that the first child was a girl.

"We wouldn't want to be a carbon copy," said David when people commented. "We love her for what she is, and I'm sure they do the same for William."

It was nice, though, when the second child was a boy. Both parents had an obscure feeling that David had to have an heir.

Of course, those years had their downs as well as their ups. David was the more serious of the pair, the more intense. He liked going to plays and art exhibitions, and sometimes he taxed Julia's powers of concentration. Julia was a wonderful mother, as everyone recognised, but her tastes ran more to parties and dancing, and she took a lot of time over her appearance, feeling she owed that to all those people for whom she was something a little spe-

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cial. David didn't resent this. In fact, he gloried in it, often remarking that he felt it an honour to play second fiddle to such a wonderful woman. He was rather pleased, though, when she bought a tape of Grieg's Piano Concerto and played it on her Walkman when she was out shopping with the little ones. It showed she had a serious side, he said, which would strengthen and mature with the years.

When did it start to go wrong? People often asked that, in hurt and bewildered tones, in later years.

"It was after the birth of Edward," David used to say. "Somehow things started falling apart then."

Nobody noticed that at the time, though. Some suggested he was using the benefit of hindsight, even making it up to form one further link in the chain that bound them to the royal couple. It was only later that David's workmates at the Building Society and Julia's young mother friends began to notice telltale signs of disharmony. This was after the newspapers began to have stories of eating disorders, rows, duties pursued separately rather than together, birthdays spent apart. Julia certainly had no trouble with anorexia or bulimia. She had always eaten heartily and continued to do so. Still, David was out alone more often: not so much at the pub, though he enjoyed the occasional pint with friends, but at the theatre in nearby Peterborough, at meetings on conservation matters, at adult education classes. Julia insisted on a quid pro quo, and David babysat the children while she had strenuous sessions at her favourite gym or went with friends to London, to the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber piece.

"You don't have to be in each other's pockets the whole time," she said. "That's not my idea of marriage."

Probably the people who knew best how badly things were going wrong were the children, though they *knew* rather than understood. Marina was later to say that her parents were together physically in the spick-and-span new Barrett home where they lived, but that she always thought of them as apart. Colleagues at the Building Society where David worked commented under their breath that he mentioned his wife less frequently than he used to. Comment even became malicious, because public taste is fickle and sentimental affection can turn sour.

"I think Princess Julia is in for a nasty shock," said an elderly worshipper at St. Michael's. "Her prince is going to move out."

That happened, in fact, a few months before the Prime Minister announced the "amicable" royal split. It certainly wasn't a nasty shock, though, for Julia. She had seen it coming for some time, and it came as a relief and a release.

"I'm fed up with him moping and emoting around the house the

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whole time," she told her father. "Now I'll have a bit of space to myself."

"Is he having an affair?" her father asked. Julia shrugged.

"Not as far as I know. Good luck to her if he is. At least I can be more open now."

Julia's father didn't ask her what she meant by that. Over the years he had become just a little in awe of his daughter.

They sold the house and split the proceeds and the property. Julia got a job in a dress shop in Peterborough and bought a small flat for herself and the children. David stayed on in Beckersley, first living with his parents, then, when he had his priorities sorted out, renting a glorified bed-sitter. He had an affair or two, mostly with older women, but none of them worked out.

"He's too neurotic," one of them said later. "Too driven. Sometimes it was as if I wasn't there."

Certainly the divorce went through a very bad patch. For a long time they communicated by note, arranging times for him to take the children out by faxes from his office to her shop. When he had taken them to the cinema, the pleasure park, or the zoo, he would leave them at the main door of the little apartment building where they lived, never on any account going up the stairs with them to the first-floor flat.

This went on for a long time—several years. Then one day, due to a misunderstanding caused by a fax machine which said it had transmitted a page when it hadn't, both turned up at Marina's school's parents day. It was touch and go when they saw each other. David certainly wished he could turn on his heels and march out of the gate. But in the end, a sense of what was expected of them both saved the day. He went over, put his hands on Julia's shoulders, and kissed her on the cheek. They talked for several minutes, and later sat together for the little play the children put on.

"In our position, you can't always do what you want," said David later to his mother.

So after that, things went better. They talked, when necessary, on the phone, met when David picked up the children, borrowed books or tapes that the other had taken when possessions were divided up (David had taken the Grieg then, but he lent her the Tchaikovsky at this period and she said she enjoyed it). The children were pleased at developments, and their parents were not unhappy.

But David had difficulty with the fact that Julia had boyfriends. She never considered marriage again, and the affairs were usually of short duration, because she was happiest on her own. But boyfriends she did have from time to time, and David confided in a colleague at work how hard he found it to cope with the idea.

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"It's not the thought of her sleeping with other men," he said. "Not as such. It's the feeling that she's letting everyone down and it's not the done thing."

His colleague refrained from mentioning the widow and the married women David had been involved with, but later he said to his wife:

"Basically he thinks it's *lèse majesté.* The king's wife sleeping with another man commits treason. I expect he'd like to do to her what Henry the Eighth did to Anne Boleyn."

"You're just jealous," said his wife. "He's got his head screwed on better than that. You can't stomach his leap-frogging over you at work."

And David was indeed doing very well at the Building Society. Renting that bed-sitter meant he had money to spend on things that impressed people: Italian suits, good restaurants, a fast car. There was an awful moment, or awful few months, when the Society was merging with another and converting to a limited company. Branches were to be closed, redundancies were in the air, and it looked as though David, high up though he was, was one of those whose services were to be dispensed with. But he put on a furious display of energy, showed everyone the brilliance of his financial judgment, and put the new company in his debt by saving it from some very bad policy decisions. When the new organisation was finally launched, he was one of its deputy chiefs, and everyone agreed that the only way for him was up. But his best friend at work said there was still something withdrawn about him, still something driven and intense.

That was how things stood in the summer of ninety-seven. The children were growing up, and he didn't take them out any longer. But he had a fine new apartment in a converted Victorian industrialist's house, and one or other of the children was calling on him all the time, to ask his advice, get him to help financially with something "everyone else" had at school, or just to chat. He would have liked to ask about their mother and her doings, but he was too much the reserved Englishman, and anything they told him in the course of their conversations was marginal or trivial. The fact that Marina and Edward were growing up, starting to lead their own lives, meant he saw Julia even less.

So when, in the early morning of September first, 1997, Julia was wakened by the sound of gravel on glass, the last person she thought of was David. As a matter of fact, she had heard that sound before—the summons of a long-ago boyfriend to leave the family home on warm summer nights—and for a moment it really took her back. She slipped out of bed, then pattered through the hallway and living room to the kitchen. The window opened easily and she looked down towards the gravel path under the bedroom.

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"David! What on earth do you think you're doing?"

He turned and came over towards her. Her hand switched on the kitchen light, and as he looked up at her, her first thought was that he looked ill, her second that he was distraught. His face was red, and behind his glasses his eyes looked puffy.

"Julia, I've got to talk to you."

"Talk to me? At this time of night? . . . What time is it?"

"About half-past four."

"You must be out of your mind."

"No, Julia, it's important. We've got to talk."

"We are talking. And probably all the neighbours are listening."

"No, they're not. Nobody's stirred. But we can't talk like this. Come down and we can sit in the car."

His eyes strayed towards his smart black BMW some yards away on the road.

"David, we've been divorced for five years. What on earth can we have to talk about sitting in your car in the road in the middle of the night?"

"I tell you, this is important. You haven't heard, have you? I'll tell you in the car. This is the most important thing that's ever happened to us."

Julia caught a glint in his eye, reflecting the light from the kitchen. She thought that, if she hadn't known him better, she might have guessed that he was mad.

"'Us' doesn't exist," she said brutally. "It did, it was good for a time, then less good, then nothing at all. Now it's less than nothing."

"But it isn't. We've still got . . . bonds. Still got responsibilities."

"The children. And even them we won't have for long."

"Julia, I can't talk about it like this. Come down, we'll go for a little drive, and then you'll understand."

"A little drive? In my nightie? Not on your life!"

"Julia, this is something so . . . so big, so awesome. . . . You've got to come down so I can explain."

"I'm surprised you haven't said that it's bigger than both of us."

David's face screwed up in distress.

"Don't be like that, Julia—not satirical and bitter, not at a time like this. It *is* bigger than both of us. That's exactly it."

"Fax me about it in the morning, eh?"

His face twisted in anger.

"You've always had a trivial mind, do you know that? You've always failed to live up to your position."

"My position?"

"Your destiny. I shouldn't be surprised that you're falling so far beneath it now."

"David, all I want now is my bed."

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"That's because you don't understand." His voice took on a pleading tone. "Come down, we'll go for a drive, and I'll *make* you understand what's got to happen."

She was genuinely bewildered.

"*Got* to happen?"

"Yes. What . . . what all this has been leading up to."

"It's not up to us to say what's got to happen."

"Of course it is. You'll see why when I tell you what's happened."

"What's happened? Have you done anything silly, David?"

His voice rose in exasperation.

"Of course I haven't! It's not a question of what I've done."

"Keep quiet. You'll waken the children."

"The children are at your parents' for the last week of the holiday, as you very well know. You're trying to get rid of me."

"All right, David, I'm trying to get rid of you. I've had enough of this, and I'm going back to bed."

She started to close the window, and as she fumbled with the latch she heard David cry: "No, don't do that, Julia. Come down and listen to what I've got to say."

Julia sat at the kitchen table and took out a cigarette from the packet lying there. "Silly bugger," she said to herself. "Anybody'd think he'd gone soft in the head." In the silence his voice, more distant now, came to her, still anguished.

"You've failed, Julia. You've been through a test, and you've failed. You're an icon with feet of clay. You'll never realize the greatness that's in you."

Julia puffed out a neat ring of smoke: Whatever were the neighbours going to say in the morning? Silly, really, that she still cared what people said about her. At least in this case it was an ex-husband they'd be talking about, not a lover.

She heard with relief a car door slam, then the sound of tyres screaming on tarmac. It was five o'clock. She wondered whether to turn on the radio and try to find a news summary but decided not to bother. As she went back towards the bedroom she heard a dull boom in the distance. Probably thunder, she thought, though she hadn't sensed a storm in the air. She slipped into bed, lay back luxuriously, then let her hands play over the smooth olive skin of Mehmet, the young man from the kebab takeaway who had delivered her order five nights ago and had been with her pretty well continuously ever since.

The trouble with David, she thought, is that he goes the whole hog with everything. Just so far and no further, that was Julia's motto. ●

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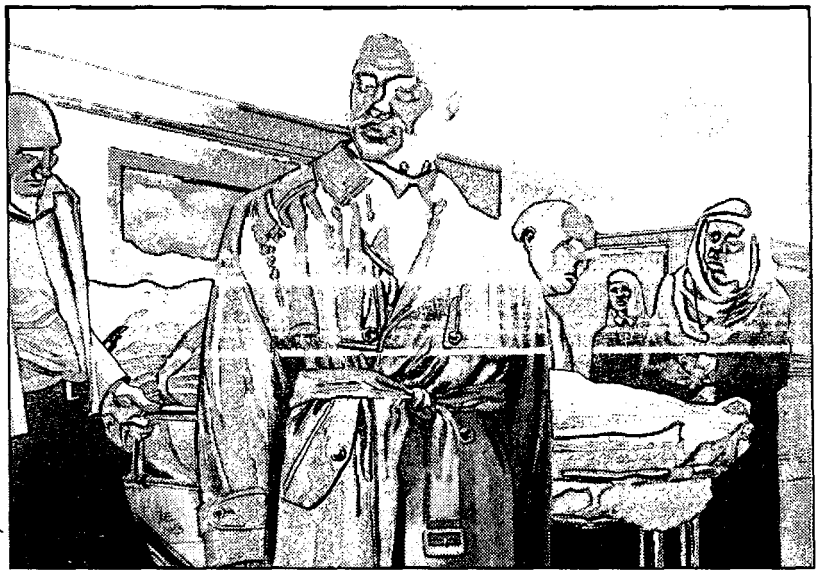

Art by Mark Evans

NUNTHELESS

by John H. Dirckx

Sister Aquinas, sleeping poorly as usual, heard the chapel bell strike two. Moments later, a sudden unfamiliar sound near at hand brought her fully awake. She lay motionless but wide-eyed waiting for the sound to be be repeated, and in a few seconds it was.

As Superior of St. Bartholomew Convent, she was one of the few who slept in this part of the building. For a full minute she lay still, analyzing the situation with the precise executive mind that had kept her in administrative positions for almost fifty years. The burglar alarm hadn't sounded, so presumably the integrity of the building hadn't been breached. There had been no outcry, so apparently no one had been injured or assaulted. Since all was silence now, no one else must have been disturbed or awakened by the noise. It had come from the general direction of the business office, where important records were stored and there was a considerable sum in cash in the safe.

Stiffly and somewhat painfully she got out of bed, drew on a heavy robe in the dark, and placed a simple white veil over her

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short-cropped hair. Treading silently in woolen slippers, she left her room and moved along the corridor toward the offices, where a light that shouldn't have been on in the middle of the night shone behind frosted glass. Sister Aquinas mentally recited a favorite prayer of a dozen words, a concise expression of faith, trust, and resignation. Thus fortified, she opened the door and entered the office.

Around 8:30 that morning, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at St. Bartholomew Convent and parked in a private lot separated from the street by a high wall. He had probably driven past this massive, sooty building once or twice a week for the past twenty years, with only a vague sense that it was some kind of religious institution. He rang the bell and had his badge out for inspection by the time the broad and heavily varnished door swung open.

A round-faced young woman, whose hair was covered by a pleated black veil that hung down her back as far as the waist, admitted him to a dark, spacious foyer. "Come in, Officer," she said, with a lilting accent, broadly beaming. "I'm Maria Obembe. That's not Irish. I come from Nigeria."

Auburn attributed this frivolous greeting to the fact that he himself was African-American. All the same, it struck him as jarringly inappropriate in a place of mourning. She led him across the foyer to what looked like the reception desk of a posh hotel in an old movie. The counter was of dark, highly polished wood, and along the wall behind it stretched tiers of pigeonholes.

Auburn looked around him in bewilderment. The interior of the building was a fantastic blend of opulence and austerity. To the right and left of the entrance stretched long, straight corridors with plush plum-colored carpet, dark wood paneling, and religious paintings in massive gilt frames. It seemed almost an alien world, certainly not what he had expected to find behind grimy walls hemmed in by slums on the edge of the factory district.

Maria Obembe seated herself demurely behind the counter at a telephone switchboard. When an older woman appeared from an office across the hall, Auburn showed identification again.

A medical doctor with a lifelong interest in books and writing, John Dirckx lives in Dayton, Ohio. He wrote more than a half-dozen stories for *EQMM* in the late 70's and early 80's, and has also had a number of stories in our sister publication, *AHMM*. We're delighted to welcome him back to *EQMM*, the more so because he specializes in a kind of mystery we see too rarely these days, a tale in which there's a bona fide question whodunit.

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"Through there, Officer," she said, pointing to the gap in the counter through which Maria had just passed. "I'm Cameron Brill."

Her razor-cut salt-and-pepper hair, brushed up and back behind the ears, looked as stiff as a porcupine's bristles. She had the manner of an airline stewardess and the handshake of a riveter.

Auburn took out a three-by-five-inch file card and a pen. "Is it Sister?" he asked, as he entered her name on the card.

"No, I'm not one of the nuns," she said with a faint smile. "Business manager."

Auburn nodded, wondering just how much business a convent carried on.

She led him into a small office behind the reception desk, a room about ten feet square enclosed by partitions with frosted glass. Pale spring sunshine shone through a high window facing the parking lot. The body of Sister Aquinas lay face upward directly under the window.

She wore what looked like an ankle-length black bathrobe and a white head covering, different from the one worn by Maria. Her glazed eyes were half open and her hands were folded neatly across her chest. There was an ugly gash in her right temple and a deeper and bloodier wound in her throat. Spatters and smears of blood showed on her clothing, but only smears on the hardwood floor.

"Is this the position she was in when she was found?" asked Auburn.

"No. She was crumpled up in the corner, facedown. Sister Sarephta, who found her, thought she had just passed out until she turned her over."

"You're sure this is the room where she was found?"

"Certainly. Anyway, that's what I was told."

"Was she a little . . . senile?"

"No, of course not. Why would you ask that?"

"Because her slippers are on the wrong feet."

Auburn stooped for a closer look, felt one of the hands, and found it as cold and stiff as a lump of clay. He used a pocket flashlight to examine the wounds and discovered a third one, very shallow, on the left wrist. Frowning, he rocked back on his heels, glanced quickly around him, and turned again toward the corpse. "There seems to be some kind of oil here," he said. "On her hands and her forehead."

"That's right. Father Trost anointed her and gave her conditional absolution."

"What time was that?"

"I can't tell you to the minute, because I wasn't here yet myself. It was before he said Mass, and that's at seven o'clock."

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Auburn stood up slowly. "Let me get one or two things straight here," he said. "What time was it when she was found by Sister . . . ?"

"Sarephta. That must have been a little after six, when she didn't show up in chapel for morning prayer."

"So she was found dead around six and given the last rites around seven. Why weren't the police called until after eight?"

Ms. Brill sighed. "Because I don't come in to work until eight. You've got to understand, Officer, that the people who live in this building are not of this world. They know the Psalms by heart, but some of them haven't seen a newspaper or a television set in twenty years, and their survival skills stop short of being able to use a hair dryer or dial a touch-tone phone."

"What about this Father who gave her the last rites?"

"Father Trost is over eighty and he has cancer. He lives in semi-retirement at St. Stephen's rectory. Rudnicki, our driver, picks him up every morning for Mass and takes him back right afterward."

Auburn went back to work. The window directly above where Sister Aquinas lay was small, square, steel-sashed, hinged along its left side. It hung slightly ajar, its catch sprung out of shape and incapable of being secured. With his pen, Auburn swung the window inward and examined the catch more closely. Around it were fresh scratches in the enamel and obvious tool marks. There were also stains on the window frame that Auburn was pretty sure were dried blood.

With much caution, he stuck his head out through the window opening. Directly below him lay dense shrubbery between the building and the parking lot.

Touching nothing that might hold fingerprints, he proceeded to make a thorough search of the office, starting with the wastebasket. Cameron Brill stood just outside the door of the small room, fidgeting slightly.

"I don't suppose anyone found a weapon?" he asked.

"No, I'm sure they didn't."

"Whose office is this?"

"Nobody's office, really. The telephone switchboard used to be in there before we got the new unit out at the reception desk. Now it's just kind of a junk room."

"Judging from body temperature and stiffening, she must have been dead for several hours. Would she normally have been working in here in the middle of the night?"

"She wouldn't have been working in there at all. She was the religious Superior of the convent, but she had very little involvement in temporal affairs. And she wasn't 'up' in the way you mean. Otherwise she would have been wearing her habit instead

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of just a veil. She must have heard noises in here and gotten out of bed to investigate."

"And been killed by a burglar." Auburn completed her thought mechanically and without conviction. "Is anything missing?"

"Not as far as we know."

"Is there any evidence of damage or a break-in anywhere else in the building?"

"No. I went around checking on all that after I called the police. The main entrance is kept locked at all times. Rudnicki says he found the doors of the garage and the loading dock out in the alley all secure when he came in this morning. Alarms go off if the fire doors at the ends of the wings are opened."

"Do you have any other kind of security system?"

"Actually, we just put in quite a good alarm system a few months ago, but this window wasn't included because it's so small, and the floodlights outside the entrance shine on it all night."

"How far away from here is her bedroom?"

She led him into the corridor, where the carpet swallowed up the sound of their passage like a layer of sawdust three inches deep. The carpet stopped at the threshold of Sister Aquinas's bedroom, a chillingly stark and plain chamber not unlike a jail cell. Besides the bed, it contained only a dresser without a mirror, a straight-backed chair, a small desk with religious books, and a lamp. The walls were unadorned except for a crucifix above the bed. The covers were thrown back as if the occupant of the bed had just left it.

They moved back in the direction of the reception desk, where two young women were lifting four gray canvas mail sacks from a wagon to the floor behind the counter. They wore severe white ankle-length dresses and no makeup. Their head coverings were different from Maria Obembe's. Probably there were different echelons in the sisterhood, like the seven choirs of angels—or was it nine?

The reception desk, with the small office behind it where Sister Aquinas had been found dead, lay immediately adjacent to the foyer. Next to that, on the same side of the corridor, was a larger office. "I'd like to look over this office area pretty thoroughly," Auburn told Cameron Brill. "There'll be some other investigators here in a few minutes, and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep everybody out until we've finished."

"I'll tell Sister Rose. By the way, my office is right across the hall, if you want to check there too. But I keep it locked overnight, and I'm sure nobody's been in there."

From the phone at the desk he called downtown to inform the coroner's office of the death and request the services of a police evidence technician.

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Then he resumed his search for the weapon and for signs of disorder, first turning his attention to the reception desk. With Cameron Brill literally at his elbow, he looked inside and under things, opening cabinets and drawers but touching nothing that might retain a fingerprint. Maria Obembe moved out of his way as needed, but remained mute except when she answered the telephone.

The larger office measured about sixteen by twenty feet. It communicated with the reception desk by an open doorway and with the corridor by a frosted-glass door. Bright fluorescent lights augmented two large windows fitted with connections to the electronic alarm system.

The decor here was rigorously practical. Except for a heavy stainless-steel crucifix hanging on the wall, this might have been the nerve center of any of a hundred commercial or administrative operations—doctor's or lawyer's office, insurance company, stock brokerage, government agency.

One wall and part of a second were covered by steel filing cabinets. A computer, a fax machine, and a photocopying machine were arranged on one of two large walnut desks of the kind called library tables. Between the windows stood an ancient but impregnable-looking safe, as big as a refrigerator. Again Auburn wondered what sort of business went on in this place.

He looked over the nickel-plated combination dials of the safe, but found more to interest him on one of its heavily enameled side panels. "Has anybody checked this safe this morning?" he asked.

"Sister Rose found it closed and locked. She says nothing is missing from inside."

He made a brief but conscientious search of Ms. Brill's office. Here too there was a large crucifix on the wall, and the screen saver on the computer had a religious motif. A window looked out on an inner court with old trees, a flower garden, and a birdbath.

He inspected the damaged window from outside and the terrain directly below it. He spent some time vainly searching the shrubbery for a discarded weapon.

When he went back into the building, Sister Sarephta, who had found the body, was waiting in Ms. Brill's office to be interviewed. Ms. Brill left them alone but didn't close the door to the corridor—perhaps, thought Auburn, in deference to some religious rule or convention.

After ascertaining the spelling, Auburn put down the simple name, Sister Sarephta, on a file card. He wasn't going to worry about details of identification now. Did nuns have Social Security numbers?

Sister Sarephta was a strapping, raw-boned, elderly woman, very much upset at the moment. She wore a full religious habit

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such as Auburn hadn't seen in twenty-five years. Her head was covered by a heavy black veil, and her floor-length robe was of the same coarse material. A starched white bib fitted close under her chin, and below it a large crucifix hung from a steel chain.

Politely ignoring his invitation to sit down, Sister Sarephta stood at attention throughout the interview. Auburn quickly sensed that, although she hadn't had much formal education, she possessed at least her fair share of common sense.

She was in charge of the main kitchen and had been at St. Bartholomew Convent for about five years. It had been almost exactly 6:00 A.M. when she found Sister Aquinas in the old telephone room.

"Was there a particular reason why you went in there this morning?" asked Auburn.

"Yes. Sister Aquinas wasn't at morning prayer. I was her guardian angel, and she was mine."

Auburn nodded encouragingly, feeling somewhat like a shrink confronted by a raving lunatic. "Guardian angel in what sense?"

"It's just an expression. We check on each other. You know, some of us are old. A sister could be taken in the night." She smiled the brave sort of smile one gives after having a tooth pulled without an anesthetic.

"Why did you think she might be in that office?"

"I didn't know where she was. I just looked until I found her."

"Was the door open?"

"Yes. It's never closed. But I couldn't see her till I got inside the room, because it wasn't light outside yet. She was down on her hands and knees in the corner. I thought she had just passed out. I called her and tried to lift her, and then I saw she was hurt, and not breathing."

"Did you move her?"

"Only to turn her on her back."

"Did you touch anything else in the office besides the body?"

"No, I got Sister Celesta out of chapel."

"Sister Celesta?"

"She's Mistress of Novices. She always takes over when Sister Superior is away, or sick. She's the acting Superior now."

"Did she touch anything in the office?"

"No, just looked at Sister for a minute and then went back to chapel and announced what had happened."

"What did you all think *had* happened?"

"Somebody must have broken in during the night. Sister Aquinas heard them and went to see what was the matter, and they—killed her. Her room is almost next door here."

"Did you see anything in there that they might have struck her with?"

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"No."

"Do you know of anything that's been stolen or damaged?"

"No, except they broke the lock on the window getting in. And they must have gone back out the same way, because they pushed Sister's body over into the corner so they could get to the window again."

Even in the celestial world of the convent, thought Auburn, lurks the inevitable amateur sleuth. No doubt there were more like her about.

No sooner had Sister Sarephta left the office than Sister Rose put in an appearance. Auburn sensed the guiding hand of Cameron Brill behind the smooth succession of witnesses.

Sister Rose wore the same kind of outfit as Sister Sarephta, and she too declined to sit down to be interviewed. There the resemblance ended. Within thirty seconds, Auburn knew Sister Rose had been a tomboy as a child and still had an independent streak that lay only a little way below the surface.

"I understand you're in charge of the office," Auburn began.

"Of processing donations, yes. But only temporarily. Sister Mary Paul is actually in charge, but she's away on retreat."

"And you checked the safe this morning and didn't find anything disturbed or missing?"

"You couldn't make a dent in that safe with a bazooka."

A *bazooka?* thought Auburn. There's a word that might well occur to somebody who hasn't seen a newspaper or a TV set for about a generation.

"How many people know the combination?"

"Just Sister Mary Paul and I, now that Sister Aquinas is gone."

"What do you think happened in there last night?"

"I don't know. I thought at first maybe one of us had finally got fed up with her arbitrariness and cruelty, and rubbed her out."

Although taken aback by this frank and brutal answer, Auburn realized he had been struggling with just such a suspicion ever since viewing the scene of the murder. Who would go to the trouble of climbing in and out of that window, and then leave empty-handed? And the murder itself was clumsy and amateurish.

"Don't pay too much attention to me," Sister Rose was saying. "I'm sort of the black sheep here. But you might as well know that Sister Aquinas won't be mourned by anyone under this roof."

"Are you seriously saying you think one of the sisters killed her?"

"No. But it wouldn't surprise me. We're all held here by a vow of obedience. Our Rule requires us to give up our personal freedom and embrace a life of servitude and humility. But we're all human, and there's a limit to what one human being will take from another human being, even in the name of religion."

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"Wasn't she responsible to some higher authority?"

"We're all responsible to some Higher Authority."

"I mean the bishop, or . . ."

"It was the bishop who made her hire a lay business manager, because her accounting and record-keeping were positively medieval. Cam Brill was the best thing that ever happened to this place. She put in computers, a modern telephone switchboard, a burglar alarm . . . but she has no power to interfere in the religious affairs of the convent. She and Sister Aquinas locked horns on day one and they've been at odds ever since. But don't be surprised if nobody else here backs up what I said. As I told you, I'm the black sheep."

Auburn thanked her for her frankness and watched thoughtfully as she moved away along the corridor with the self-assured stride of an artillery officer. Bazooka, indeed!

When he went back past the reception desk, he found that both Sergeant Kestrel, the police evidence technician, and Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, had arrived and set up shop. They both assured Auburn that they had photos showing the soles of the reversed slippers. He started to explain the traces of oil on the corpse, but Stamaty, who was Greek Orthodox, was way ahead of him there.

"According to Sister Sarephta, who found the body," Auburn told them, "it was originally facedown and shoved into the corner, apparently so the killer could get back out the window."

Kestrel snorted without looking up from his work with a dusting-powder dispenser. Auburn had grown used to his rigidly perfectionistic and humorless personality, but today the evidence technician seemed to be in a particularly testy mood. "When you get a chance," said Kestrel, "you might inform the good widow that nobody's climbed through this window in the last thirty years. If ever. The dust on the outer edge of the sill is a couple centimeters thick. There's no trace outside of a ladder being set up on the ground, or any disturbance to the shrubbery. And there's no way that catch was forced from outside."

"I guess you noticed the blood on the catch?"

"Bagged and tagged."

Auburn sighed inaudibly. "I know you never miss anything the first time around," he said, "but I want you to take a look at the safe next door. Just a look, okay?"

As he left them to their work, a diffident treble cough behind him told him that another nun had approached soundlessly on that dense carpet.

"Officer, I'm Sister Celesta. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived."

The acting Superior was sallow and angular and she had a

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slight limp. She was older than Sister Sarephta but, unlike her, she hadn't a single wrinkle. Since Ms. Brill was on the phone in her office now, they talked standing in a sunlit corner of the foyer. Sister Celesta was clearly a woman of energy and determination, shrewd and just a little hard-nosed.

She confirmed everything that Sister Sarephta had told Auburn, but added nothing of her own. When Auburn told her Ms. Brill had let him take a look at Sister Aquinas's room, she bridled and scowled as if he'd used profanity in her presence. "She'll hear from me about that. This is a cloister."

"If we have to do any more searching, we'll see that we get proper permission first," he assured her. "How many people live here in all?"

"One hundred seventy-four," she answered without hesitation.

"As many as that?" asked Auburn, a little staggered. "And may I ask what they all do?"

"They have quite a variety of assignments. Some teach at local parochial schools, some work as visiting nurses among the poor, some make baby clothes. We have seventeen novices and twelve postulants, who haven't made their vows yet. They work in the kitchen and the laundry and do the housekeeping. Over sixty of the sisters are retired. Some are able to sew or make rosaries. Others spend their time praying and meditating. All of us have voluntarily accepted a life of poverty and self-denial, renunciation of the things of this world, and the service of God through service to His children."

Auburn mused, choosing his words carefully. "Sister, we feel there's a possibility that the break-in may have been faked. That could mean that Sister Aquinas was killed by somebody who didn't need to break in, because they were already in. I get the idea she was kind of a dictator. . . ."

Again she recoiled indignantly. "I don't know to whom you've been talking. Possibly one of the younger generation who haven't yet grasped the point that discipline is the very essence of the religious life. Observing the evangelical counsels is an endurance sport, not a pleasure cruise. A convent is no place for wimps."

At least, thought Auburn, this one's lingo is up-to-date.

"Don't take this wrong, now," he said, "but how much do you really know about all these women who live here?"

She took it wrong.

"Officer, if you have the idea that one of the sisters in this convent attacked Sister Superior in the middle of the night with a butcher knife, I suggest you go away and come back some other time when you're better oriented to reality."

"All right, Sister." He fell back to regroup. "This is a rough dis-

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trict you live in. Have you had any trouble before with vandalism or break-ins? Any enemies in the neighborhood, any threats?"

"Never." The assertion was so dogmatic that Auburn decided not to pursue the issue.

"Could anyone have slipped in and hidden somewhere—a meter reader, somebody making a delivery, a visitor . . . ?"

"I can't say that's impossible, but it's very unlikely. You've seen for yourself that access to the convent is highly restricted."

"You have some valuable art objects here. What else is there to tempt a burglar?"

"There's always a good deal of cash in the safe in the office, but that hasn't been touched."

"Excuse me if I seem to be prying, but may I ask what kind of business you carry on here? I mean, you have an office full of records, a safe with a lot of cash in it, a business manager . . ."

A frigid smile settled over her waxy features. "It probably isn't what *you* would call business," she said. "We receive contributions from the public to maintain the convent and support the programs we carry on, as well as the foreign missions. Most of the contributions are small amounts in cash—what Cam Brill calls 'nickel and dime stuff.' We also get donations of clothing and food for our poor."

"You called this a cloister. Does that mean members of the public never come in here?"

"According to Canon Law, no one is supposed to go beyond the reception area except in an emergency, such as a fire or a severe illness needing medical attention."

"These other rooms along the front of the building . . ."

"Conference rooms and a utility room to the left. A library and a music room to the right. They've been gone over carefully and nothing is missing or out of place."

"Would you know, Sister, whether anybody heard anything unusual during the night?"

"If anybody heard anything, they haven't mentioned it to me. You might ask Teresa Worth. Her room is just next to the office, on the other side from Sister Aquinas's. She's the night portress."

"She's the which?"

"Night portress. Doorkeeper. Maybe the word's a little antiquated. Nowadays it mainly involves answering the phone, but opening the front door is still part of the assignment, since it's kept locked at all times."

"I suppose Sister Maria is the day portress, then?"

"Maria Obembe, yes. She isn't a sister yet, just a postulant, like Teresa. In fact, she doesn't belong to our order. She's boarding with us while studying nursing at Chalfont Hospital. Since she's on night duty at the hospital, Sister Aquinas made her day

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portress." She added, in a managerial footnote quite devoid of sentiment, "There aren't any drones in a convent."

Auburn wondered when Maria Obembe slept.

Sister Celesta excused herself to get on with funeral arrangements for Sister Aquinas. Auburn stood for a while looking out the window next to the main entrance at the brightly lit world outside.

He felt completely disoriented by this exotic milieu. Thick walls shut out the traffic sounds and the noises of the nearby factories, and here within he heard no radio or TV, not even a raised voice. Yet there were sounds he couldn't understand or interpret—the echo of a distant bell, a metallic roaring on another floor that could have been anything from a sandblaster to a cement mixer.

Nowhere a trace of dust or disorder, everywhere the smell of furniture polish, brass polish, marble polish, and strong coffee. The sisters wore no makeup or jewelry, and their veils concealed their hair and threw their faces into deep shadow, so that you could hardly tell them apart, let alone guess their ages. Except for Maria, who was only a postulant, he hadn't seen one of them sit down yet—not even Sister Celesta, who was older than his mother. Was there such a thing as a can of beer, a Gothic romance, a pair of jeans, a single cigarette under that roof? Auburn doubted it.

And then he thought of the extensive files, the safe, the business manager, and Sister Rose's disquieting remarks about Sister Aquinas's abuse of power. Did these people really live in the realm of the spiritual, in an atmosphere of faith, hope, and charity, or was that just a facade to conceal some very material interests and some very human weaknesses, emotions, and perhaps transgressions?

Kestrel and Stamaty were winding up their work in the office. Sister Aquinas lay just as Auburn had first seen her, the pinched, bloodless features nearly buried in the folds of her veil. "Does this look to you like an interrupted burglary?" he asked.

"Not through these bifocals it doesn't," said Stamaty.

"You caught the stains on the safe, right?"

"Bagged and tagged," said Kestrel.

"So where's the weapon?"

"Not anywhere we've looked," said Stamaty. "I'm out of here as soon as the mortuary guys come to take her downtown."

"Lucky you," grumbled Kestrel. "I have to get prints from everybody who's touched anything in here."

"Well, then, you don't need mine," said Auburn.

Suddenly he felt claustrophobic. And hungry.

The removal of human remains to the county mortuary was handled by private contractors, not public employees. As Auburn

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left the building, Maria was just admitting the mortuary crew—two gum-chewing skinheads in white leather jackets, with steel rings in their noses. They accepted without comment her assurance that her name wasn't Irish.

Auburn lost nearly an hour eating lunch at a fast-food mill staffed, apparently, by the local chapter of the Shuffling Young Corpses of America. Actually, he was in no hurry to return to the stifling atmosphere of the convent. How was he supposed to find the weapon when practically the whole place was off-limits? But he cringed at the thought of applying for a search warrant, much less executing one in that place.

"Hey, man, I thought you were all finished up," said Maria as she readmitted him.

"Not yet," said Auburn. "I understand you're studying nursing."

"Yes, at the Chalfont. In six months' time I'm going back to my own country. If I don't get married first!"

Again that jarring note of playful teasing.

"Don't look so shocked, man. I'm only a postulant. I haven't taken any vows yet. But I shall do, you'll see."

"How do you get back and forth between here and Chalfont Hospital?"

"Well, you know, since I lost the key to my Cadillac I just have to ride the bus."

"What time did you get back from the hospital this morning?"

"About seven-thirty. Father Trost was just finishing his sermon when I slipped into the chapel. I didn't know about Sister Aquinas until after."

"Who let you in?"

"I'm a big girl now. They let me have a key to the front door, and I didn't lose that one yet."

"Where do you get all your energy? Working all night, and then answering the phone and the doorbell all day?"

"I'll tell you a little secret, man. When nobody but God is looking, I slip into my room and take a little nap." She nodded down the corridor beyond the late Sister Superior's room. "The phone and the doorbell ring in there too when I'm on duty."

The body had been removed and Kestrel and Stamaty were gone, but things weren't quite back to normal yet. A short, stocky man with a curly fringe around a shining bald crown was standing on a step stool in the room where the body had lain, repairing the damaged window catch. Cameron Brill introduced him as Rudnicki, the convent's chauffeur and handyman.

Rudnicki was evidently slightly retarded, but he seemed dexterous enough with his tools, and Auburn recalled that he drove the priest in every morning for early Mass. He lived four blocks away on DeWire Street, had worked at the convent about five years,

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had been a part-time or occasional helper for some time before that.

"What time do you come in in the morning?"

"I'm usually here about six. I get the car out of the garage and go get Father Trost at St. Stephen's, so he can be here for Mass at seven."

"Was everything locked up okay when you came in this morning? See anything unusual?"

"No, sir. The doors on the alley was all locked, and I didn't see anything wrong."

With a pair of heavy pliers he bent the damaged window latch back into shape by brute force. Auburn carefully looked over each tool in his plastic tote-tray.

At the desk, Maria was talking to another young woman in a postulant's headdress. "Officer, I'm Teresa Worth," said the other woman, turning toward him. "Sister Celesta said you wanted to talk to me."

Auburn was reminded of a favorite saying of his father's: "A woman without charm is Nature's cruelest jest." She was about thirty. Over her habit, if that was the word, she was wearing a coarse white apron. Her manner was elfin and otherworldly.

He led her to the sunny spot in the foyer where he and Sister Celesta had talked.

"I understand you're the night portress, and that your room is near the office?"

"Yes, right there," she said, pointing.

"Does that mean you stay up all night?"

"No, just dressed. Like a fireman."

"To answer the phone?"

"Or the doorbell. They both ring in my room during the night. If it's the phone I have to go to the switchboard."

"Did you have to get up last night?"

"No. The last call came about eleven."

They moved out of the way of a postulant who was vacuuming the carpet with the singleness of purpose and measured tread of a robot. "Did you hear anything during the night?"

"Just angels' wings flapping. I was dead to the world until five-thirty, when I got up for morning prayer."

Auburn made some entries on a fresh file card and thanked her for her information. Then he wandered along the stretch of corridor outside the office, pondering his next move.

It was evident not only that the window hadn't really been used for entry, but also that the faking of a break-in had been a clumsy spur-of-the-moment action. Therefore the murder itself must have been unpremeditated, the outcome of a chance encounter between murderer and victim, or of a sudden violent conflict of interests.

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And the murderer must have been someone with access to the convent.

Not only that, but the fresh spatters of blood on the side of the safe, and the reversal of the victim's slippers, suggested that the murder had actually taken place in the larger office, and that the body had been moved to the place where it was found, not only to support the deception of the break-in but also to draw attention away from the safe.

As he passed Cameron Brill's office, he heard the sound of weeping from behind the half-closed door. On knocking and peering around the edge of the door, he found Ms. Brill at her desk, with her head in her hands, sobbing violently.

Auburn usually reacted to scenes like this with annoyance and revulsion, but he forced himself to butt in. "I hope I didn't get you in trouble with Sister Celesta by telling her you showed me Sister Aquinas's bedroom?"

"Oh, no, it isn't that. I'm just feeling such a fool for not having had an alarm connection put on that window—the very one they came through."

She was holding her eyes wide open, evidently in the hope that her tears would dry instead of running down her cheeks.

"For what it's worth, Ms. Brill, we're pretty sure nobody got in through that window. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about this whole burglar alarm thing. Sister Celesta said there's never been a problem here with break-ins or vandalism. She also told me the only thing a burglar would have been after was cash in the safe, from contributions, which I assume would be a fairly small sum. So why the alarm system, which must have cost a mint?"

"Sit down, Officer. I don't know what you'd call a fairly small sum. If the amounts of cash I take to the bank every Friday get any bigger, I'm going to have to ask for a revolver and an armored car."

"As much as that? Where does all this money come from?"

"Most of it comes through the mail. Under normal circumstances, two or three sisters spend every day except Sunday in that workroom processing donations. Most of the money comes in the form of checks, but an incredible number of people trust cash to the postal service, and an incredible amount of it arrives intact."

"I'm sorry if I'm asking awkward questions, but I don't happen to belong to your faith. What eventually happens to all this money?"

"Well, it's almost the only source of our operating budget, which is huge. Some of it goes to the diocese . . ."

"To the which?"

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"The local church administration, under the bishop. Some of it goes to Rome. And at least a third of it goes to our foreign missions."

"And what do the people who send you all this money expect to get in return?"

"Healing of their physical and spiritual ills. Resolution of conflicts . . . inner peace . . . resignation to the will of God. Maybe a couple of extra points toward eternal salvation."

He went back to the room where the body had been found. Rudnicki, his repairs finished, had packed up his tools and gone. Something was gnawing at Auburn—something somebody had said kept popping up in his mind and tripping him like a loose floorboard. Once again he looked over the larger office, the file cabinets, the office equipment, the black enameled safe with its abundant cache of donations.

He decided to knock off for the day and headed for the entrance. Maria Obembe, seated at the switchboard behind the reception desk, smiled but remained as still as a statue. "You don't need me to let you out. Only to let you in."

On his way home he stopped in at headquarters and requested background checks on Cameron Brill, Stanley Rudnicki, and Maria Obembe, all of whom had keys to the convent. An attempt to verify by phone that Maria had been on duty at Chalfont Hospital all night was vigorously repulsed by a nursing supervisor who evidently took him for a jealous boyfriend.

He put off looking into the backgrounds of any of the nuns. In the first place, he wasn't quite sure how to identify them. He doubted that a request for a check on "Sister Celesta" would yield much information.

That night Auburn dreamed that, while investigating a murder in an insane asylum, he suddenly realized that it was the inmates who were running the place. When several of them armed with butcher knives cornered him in the basement, he woke up in a sweat. Instantly he realized what it was that had been bothering him all afternoon and evening. Although it was almost 3:00 A.M., he called Kestrel at home.

"Sorry about this. When I told you that one of the sisters said the killer must have gone back out the window because the body was shoved into the corner, you said something like, 'Tell the good widow nobody came through this window.' What did you mean by 'widow'?"

Kestrel emitted a long sigh that ended in a groan. "Sarephta, you said. Sister Sarephta. Look it up. Bible." He hung up.

One of Auburn's two Bibles had a dictionary in the back. In five minutes he was remembering the Sunday school story about the widow of Sarephta, who baked a cake for Elijah with the last of

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her flour and oil. He sat at his desk immersed in Bible studies for nearly an hour before going back to bed.

When he got to the office next morning there was already a message to call Kestrel at the lab.

"No surprises," announced Kestrel, without alluding to Auburn's phone call during the night. "No latent prints that don't match people who belong there in the offices. The stains on the window and the ones you found on the side of the safe are all the victim's blood. This isn't a conclusive molecular match, but the probability's better than ninety-nine percent by blood group serologies. Stamaty's looking for you."

The coroner's investigator, reached at his office in the courthouse across the street, had a preliminary autopsy report. "She died of a massive intracranial hemorrhage," he said. "The blow to the head fractured the temporal bone and tore the middle meningeal artery. She also has a deep wound in the right side of the neck, nonlethal, and a defensive wound on the left wrist. Time of death was between eleven P.M. and three A.M."

"Got a slant on the weapon?"

"Dr. Valentine says look for something heavy, like a meat cleaver or a machete."

While Auburn was trying to digest that, reports came in on the background checks he'd requested the previous afternoon. Cameron Brill had never been married and lived alone in an apartment in Harmony Heights. She had an MBA degree, and before becoming business manager at St. Bartholomew three years previously she'd had a top position with one of the savings and loans in town. In making a credit application within the past two years, she'd reported an annual income from all sources in excess of $100,000. Which seemed to cast doubt on the idea of her being caught burgling a convent in the middle of the night, armed with a meat cleaver or a machete, but raised the question why she was working there at all.

Rudnicki was also unmarried, hadn't finished high school, drew a small allowance for partial disability due to developmental and learning disorders, and lived in a church-affiliated group home. He'd had three arrests for drunk-and-disorderly within the past eight years, leading to two fines and one term in the workhouse, suspended.

Auburn called the group home immediately. The resident director told him that Rudnicki had been present for bed-check and lights out at midnight on the night of the murder, but his whereabouts before midnight couldn't be verified.

He put the case on hold while he scrolled through his e-mail, cleared his "in" tray, and made sure he didn't have any court appointments. Then he went to see his immediate superior, Lieu-

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tenant Savage. After summarizing the case, he presented his theory. "I'm sure the murder took place in the main office, next to the safe," he said, "and I think that safe comes into the picture somehow."

"Are we really sure nothing was stolen?" asked Savage.

"No, and that's another point. I have the feeling they're covering something up. Maybe they know the killer is one of their own. According to one witness, the victim was unpopular with the people who reported to her, which is just about everybody in the place—all hundred and seventy-four of them."

"Could even be a conspiracy," said Savage, with a wry look about the mouth that Auburn knew betokened irony. "Imagine the headlines."

"Well, anyway, it's unfamiliar territory for me, and I can't be sure whether they're holding out on me or just operating on a different wavelength. From whatever motive, somebody who either lives in that convent, or has access to it, committed a violent murder there the night before last. I think it's perfectly possible the weapon is still there somewhere. With a warrant and a couple guys I might have half a chance of finding it. And if I could get a line on what really goes on in that office, or what's really in that safe, I'd be way ahead."

Savage's lean face cracked in an austere smile. "You might as well know we've got a little P.R. problem here," he said. "Lieutenant Delaney's sister is one of the nuns at St. Bartholomew. She's already been on the phone to him complaining that the police are harassing the residents instead of getting out and finding the psychopath who broke in and killed Sister What's-her-name Aquinas.

"So I'm going to ask you to wing it without a warrant for a day or two. One thing I would do, though. See if you can get a list of everybody that lives in the place, Social Security numbers and birth dates and hometown addresses and whatever else they'll let you have. We'll get Records to run background checks on the whole crowd, if it takes three days. Might turn up something interesting."

"If they think my nosing around there yesterday was harassment," grumbled Auburn, "how are they going to react when I ask for a list? That makes it pretty obvious we're trying to figure out which one of the sisters chopped her boss."

"Tell them it's just routine. Keep it casual. Sing 'em a lullaby. You know how to do that so well, Cy—otherwise you'd still be a beat cop."

Trust the lieutenant to know when a guy needed a dose of horseradish.

Maria Obembe answered the phone and transferred his call to Cameron Brill's office. "Yes," said Ms. Brill, "we have complete personnel records on all the sisters. Even though they don't actu-

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ally own any property, on paper they draw salaries. We're required to do withholding tax, Social Security, unemployment, the whole bit. If you can give me an e-mail address, I'll send you the list as soon as I can."

"That's even better than I was hoping for. Have there been any new developments at your end?"

"None that I know of. Except that some of the sisters are going around afraid of their own shadows."

"I'll probably be there later in the day. I'm going to ask you not to let anybody work in the big office until I'm through in there."

It was about noon when he arrived at the convent. He was admitted by a postulant he hadn't seen before. After telling him Cameron Brill had gone out for lunch and all the nuns were in the refectory having theirs, she returned to the reception desk and proceeded to ignore him.

Nothing could have suited Auburn better. He went into the larger office and slipped through the frosted-glass door back into the corridor. First he made sure he couldn't be seen from the switchboard and then, risking the wrath of Sister Celesta, the bishop, and even the CEO Almighty, he entered Sister Aquinas's bedroom. The bed had been stripped, and a lightning search showed him that virtually everything else had been removed from the room as well.

Next he went into the room occupied by the night portress, Teresa Worth. Favored by the Spartan simplicity of life in the sisterhood, he finished up almost as quickly here. With his heart racing, he opened the door of Maria Obembe's room. What if she was taking a nap instead of eating lunch?

There was no one in the room. As in Teresa's room, he found a minimum of personal effects in perfect order. But when he lifted the mattress at the foot end of the bed, he saw a rough Maltese cross imprinted in dark blood on the part of the sheet that was tucked underneath.

After asking directions of the young woman at the desk, he went out the main entrance and around to the alley. Next to a loading dock where a produce truck was making a delivery, an overhead garage door stood open. He found Rudnicki eating lunch out of a plastic lunchbox amid a wild chaos of janitorial equipment, wheelbarrows, broken furniture, and old tires. A battered workbench groaned beneath a jumble of socket wrenches, grease-guns, carpenter's tools, cans of paint, and miscellaneous hardware, which Rudnicki had no doubt inherited from a long line of predecessors.

Rudnicki greeted him in his droll, shy manner.

"Still checking up on a few things," said Auburn. "Do you remember what you did the night before last—the night Sister Aquinas got killed?"

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For a while the handyman alternately chewed his sandwich and thought. "Me and a couple fellows from the house went to the ball game," he said at length. "Doubleheader at Wilmot Field."

"Did you drive?"

"No, we walked the whole way out and back. The only car I drive is that one right there, and it belongs to the sisters."

While they talked, Auburn wandered up and down the garage, studying the tools on the workbench, the shelves, and the floor. He knew exactly what he was looking for, and he found it—a versatile and deadly implement of the sort that figures in hardware catalogues as a case opener.

"Is this yours?" he asked, fishing it out from under some other articles with a screwdriver. It was something like a carpenter's hammer, but the nail-pulling claw stuck up above the head, continuing the line of the handle, while in its usual place opposite the nail-driving part there was a small curved hatchet blade.

"Guess so. I don't know what all I got in here."

"Remember seeing this before?"

"Guess so."

"Looks like somebody cleaned it up pretty recently. Did you?"

"No, sir. Don't think so."

After locking the case opener in the trunk of his car, Auburn went back to the garage. He found a door into the basement of the convent unlocked, and Rudnicki made no move to keep him from passing through it. Although he had no landmarks to go by, he managed to keep his bearings fairly well. Coming to a stairway, he went up one flight.

Unlike the reception area, this part of the main level evidently hadn't been redecorated since 1922, the date on the cornerstone of the building. The floor here was covered by worn linoleum instead of deep-pile carpet, and the monotony of long rows of narrow doorways was relieved only by a life-sized religious statue set in a niche.

Evidently lunchtime was over. Two young women garbed as postulants came around a far corner pushing a cart of folded linen. Auburn recognized one of them as Teresa Worth, the night portress. At that distance he guessed rather than heard that she was telling her companion who he was and how he came to be wandering around inside the cloister.

"Change of assignment?" he asked Teresa as they drew closer.

"No. I work in the laundry during the day and I do the telephone at night." Auburn remembered Sister Celesta's remark about there being no drones in the convent. "Sounds to me like you could have a labor-relations problem around here," he said. "Don't you ever get a vacation?"

"Sure. They call it a retreat. Two weeks shut up in a convent in Mississippi, with no air conditioning, getting spiritually regener-

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ated by some old priest who came back from the foreign missions with half his spark plugs burned out."

"Teresa!" hissed her companion, aghast.

Teresa Worth pushed her load on down the corridor without breaking her stride.

On his way back to the reception area he passed the music room, where someone was practicing scales and chord progressions on a piano that badly needed the services of a tuner. Did Canon Law make any provision for that?

He found Sister Rose and Cameron Brill closeted in the latter's office. Canvas mail sacks, presumably including those he'd seen delivered yesterday, were stowed in every available corner.

"I'm sorry to be a nuisance," he told them, "but we're still not satisfied about the safe. I'm going to ask you to open it in my presence, Sister Rose, so that I can verify for myself that nothing's been disturbed there."

The women exchanged glances and there was a long stretch of silence. Ms. Brill broke it.

"I couldn't open the safe if I wanted to," she said, "because I don't know the combination. But we've already told you nothing is missing from the safe. Whoever killed Sister Aquinas certainly didn't open it. So as far as I'm concerned, it's off-limits to the police. Unless you have a search warrant."

Something had happened since their phone conversation that morning. Maybe they'd rapped her knuckles for releasing the personnel list, which Auburn hadn't even seen yet.

"I don't have a warrant. I was hoping we could get along without one."

"Sister Mary Paul may have a different view when she gets back from retreat next week," said Sister Rose. "For now, I'm afraid we'll have to decline to open the safe."

"All right—I can live with that," he said, staying civil with an effort. "But if my lieutenant sends me back tomorrow with a warrant, we won't be waiting for Sister Mary Paul's approval."

He was seething with frustration. Their refusal to open the safe was a major obstacle to his investigation. Usually, when Auburn found himself in a bind like this, things just got steadily worse. This time, dumb luck came to his rescue.

Instead of going into the office, he paced silently up and down the part of the corridor that wasn't part of the cloister, trying to put things together. The atmosphere of the convent still seemed unreal to him, but this stretch of country was becoming tiresomely familiar, with its carpet like an unmowed lawn and its row of evenly spaced religious paintings in ornate frames.

Auburn wasn't a connoisseur of fine art, but one picture caught his eye. Bright reds and golds in the middle of the scene con-

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trasted sharply with deep shadows around the edges. The picture showed a man with a straggling gray beard examining a pot of coins buried in a recess that he had just uncovered under his bed. The artist had contrived to make the subject's features the epitome of greed, impiety, and absorption in worldly matters. Below the picture, a caption had been lettered in flowing script on a plaque attached to the frame: "For where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also. Jo:38:7."

Auburn was turning away from the picture when he suddenly swung back to take a second look at the caption. Something didn't jibe here. He'd spent enough time last night renewing his acquaintance with Holy Writ to know that there weren't thirty-eight chapters in St. John's gospel. He pulled out the pocket Bible he'd brought along for just such an emergency. Then for a while he was very busy.

When he finally emerged from the larger office, he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he almost failed to notice Maria Obembe at the desk.

"You don't look full of joy," she observed. "You still don't know who killed Sister Superior?"

"I'm getting warmer. Any hints?"

She rubbed her hands together slowly in thought. "Just go on seeking," she said with unwonted solemnity.

He did that, again going over the reception area and the office behind it where the body had been found. But it was only when Maria had to go to the door to admit a visitor for Sister Celesta that he got down to business at the mail rack behind the desk.

Before four o'clock he was back at headquarters. He dropped off specimens with Kestrel and grabbed a meal of leftover scraps in the canteen before going to his office. On his desk he found a printout of the head count of St. Bartholomew Convent that Cameron Brill had e-mailed earlier in the day. With surnames and Social Security numbers, the sisters seemed somehow less ethereal and more human. Records had provided some preliminary data, but full background checks would take more time. One of the Social Security numbers on the list had never been issued, and Auburn was asked to get a correction from his source.

It came as no surprise to him, thanks to Kestrel's tip, that Sister Sarephta had taken the veil after being widowed, but the fact that her married name was Rudnicki gave him a bit of a jolt. He spent a long time on the phone again with the director of the home where Rudnicki lived before looking into the question of the erroneous Social Security number.

It was one of those cases where, once matters start falling into place, everything suddenly resolves itself by chain reaction. It wasn't Bible study that kept him awake most of that night. He was up and dressed at six, and was ringing the doorbell of the con-

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vent at a quarter to seven, accompanied by Patrolman Fritz Dollinger.

A bedraggled-looking Teresa Worth admitted them to the dark, silent foyer. "Everybody'll be in chapel in a couple of minutes," she informed them, cool and distant.

"Everybody but us three, Ms. Wofford," said Auburn.

Instantly her mood changed to one of down-to-earth electric urgency. "Hey, guys, don't give me away, huh?" She grabbed each of them by a wrist. "I'll do anything—"

"I believe it," said Dollinger.

"Tracy Wofford," said Auburn, "you're under arrest for the murder of Sister Aquinas, also known as Alberta Bollstedt." He read her her rights.

She abandoned all pretense of sisterly dignity and restraint. "You must be out of your freaking mind."

"It was a pretty messy killing," Auburn went on imperturbably, "not the kind of crime a woman ordinarily commits. But we're satisfied that the only man who's known to have access to the convent was elsewhere at the time of the murder. There *are* some women who have a violent streak, so that when—"

"What are you giving me? Hey, some crackhead crawled out of a sewer and busted in that window and cut up the old lady."

"Just listen to the man, okay?" said Dollinger. "Just listen."

"Right up the hall here," said Auburn, "there's a picture on the wall of an old guy with a cellar full of gold and a heart full of sin. It's based on a Bible quotation. I don't know when, and I sure can't guess why, but somebody painted out the reference after the quotation and wrote in some different numbers. If you take the letters JO for the numeral ten, the whole thing just happens to be the combination of the safe in the office."

Tracy Wofford was staring unhappily at the carpet.

"If I could figure that out, so could you. When you were assigned as night portress, you had plenty of opportunities to check it out. Maria, the day portress, was away at the hospital during the night, and nobody else slept on this level but Sister Superior. Maybe her hearing was better than you thought, or maybe she didn't sleep as soundly as you hoped.

"Anyway, she found you in the middle of the night with your grubby fingers in the safe. Just to be prepared for such a surprise, you'd borrowed a case opener from Rudnicki's workshop down in the garage. When Sister Aquinas caught you red-handed, you killed her. Maybe you had a grudge against her for making you work day and night—"

Abruptly she tore off her headdress and wadded it into a ball, revealing dark hair clipped very short.

"In order to divert attention from the safe," Auburn continued,

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"you dragged her body to the little office behind the desk. Her slippers came off while you were moving her, and you put them back on the wrong feet. You used the case opener to damage the window so it would look like the killer had broken in there. You hid the weapon temporarily under the mattress on Maria's bed.

"Eventually you put it back in the garage, after scrubbing it with laundry detergent—but not well enough to get the blood out of the cracks between the metal head and the wooden handle. And when you mopped up the bloodstains in the big office, you missed a few. Some of them weren't very obvious until daylight shone along the side of the safe, and some were actually inside the safe, where I found them yesterday afternoon.

"When I opened the safe I found hundreds of dollars in cash that had come through the mail. Either before or after you killed Sister Aquinas, you grabbed yourself a handful of bills and sealed them in a big Manila envelope from the office, which you doubled over and crammed into the back of Sister Mary Paul's mailbox. Since she was away on retreat, you figured nobody would disturb it until you got a chance to move it. What do you want to bet the DNA in the saliva on the flap of the envelope will match yours?"

She stood silent and immobile, smoldering with rage and terror, her eyes fixed in fascination on Auburn's. Somewhere in the building a bell was ringing.

"When you decided to drop out of sight for a while and join the sisters, you gave them a false name and a false Social Security number. That number bounced when I ran a check on all the women living here. I followed it up with the convent administration and learned that they were still waiting for you to submit a copy of your birth certificate and proof of baptism. By that time you had my full attention.

"The day before yesterday a police officer took your fingerprints, because you were known to have worked in the area where the murder took place and we were looking for evidence that an outsider had killed Sister Aquinas. Yesterday I ran your prints through the FBI's computer, at enormous cost to the taxpayers, and came up with Tracy Wofford, alias Trisha Wolfe—wanted in Minnesota for armed robbery, grand theft auto, two counts of malicious wounding, and interstate flight to avoid prosecution. They even faxed me your picture, taken when you were a blonde. Do we need the cuffs?"

Between them they led her out into the world to which she and they belonged—the world of cigarette smoke, profanity, and broken glass on the sidewalk, where people worked for a living and went by their real names. Well, some of them. ●

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A Good Woman

by Eileen Dewhurst

On the end, Claude Curzon didn't have to tell his wife that the stairs were getting too much for him. He had psyched himself up to it one February midmorning when they were drinking coffee and he would have been cosily aware of the wintry weather beyond the sitting-room window if he hadn't felt so upset at having to confess to his increasing weakness.

But before he could start, Connie put her cup down, leaned towards him, and said gently, "I think the time has come, pet, to turn the dining room into your bedroom and study."

Eileen Dewhurst has been writing for 25 years and will soon have 21 books in print. She last appeared in *EQMM* in May '95, but she has been active in the short story field in the interim, writing tales of her own and taking charge of last year's Crime Writers Association short story competition in Liverpool, England. Ms. Dewhurst lives in Wirral, in northwest England, with an appropriate companion for a crime writer, a black cat. ¶

"Oh, Connie . . ." It was no wonder he was submitting with so little struggle to the progress of his illness, with an angel like Connie to anticipate his every need. And respect his every last shred of pride. *Study,* she had said, according as much importance to the poor remains of his authorship as to his physical disabilities. "Yes, dear, I think it has." Because of her insight that was all he needed to say. "And it will save your legs, too. So far I'm all right at night." But restless, needing to sit up and read half the time, so that he was already in the spare bedroom. That had been his decision, but Connie had gone along with it; she had never crowded him.

"Yes, but I'll take the intercom up with me when I go to bed and put it on the other pillow. Comfortable, darling?" Connie got to her feet and plumped the cushions, softening the impact of the long chair against his wasted body.

"So long as you don't go too far away." It was an effort, now, to turn his head so that he could gaze lovingly up at her.

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"Of course not, Claude. I'm only going as far as the village."

"Sometimes you must wish it was farther. . . ."

"Only if you could come with me. And I get to Muriel's every week, a nice ride through the countryside."

"On a bus. You should've let me teach you to drive, Connie."

"What you haven't had, you don't miss. And if I'd been driving I'd never have met Danny."

"No. . . ."

She saw his face cloud, and tousled the thin remains of his hair. "You'll like him. And I'll feel better going off for the day knowing there's someone here with you."

"Someone you met on the bus!"

"You can get chatty on a bus. And you know how good I am at finding out about people without their realizing. He's bringing references, but if you don't like him, that'll be the end of it. All right?"

"Of course, darling. Off you go, now."

"I shan't be long." Connie's smile was bracing, but her hand trailed slowly down his cheek.

He put his own up to detain it. "You're so very good to me, Connie. So faithful."

"Till death us do part. Remember?"

He used her hand to wipe away a tear.

"And none of that, now. You should be feeling cheerful since the doctors said your condition isn't life-threatening."

"Yet."

"Perfect health is life-threatening in the long run." Connie kissed his brow. "Now, no more dumps. You're doing very well."

But his knowledge that he had said goodbye to the upper half of his house was giving him a bad day. "When it's a marathon to reach the loo, get a book off the shelf? And as for being a husband . . ."

"You're all the husband I want, Claude, and that's the truth. Now, cheer up and I'll be back before you know."

Claude listened to the small sounds of his wife's departure and leaned forward to part the net curtains as the front door closed, his love and gratitude swelling as he heard the click of her neat feet on the path and watched her small controlled figure negotiate the gate.

As he sank back in his chair he thanked Connie, too, for contriving most of the time to keep his self-pity at bay. How could a man with a wife like Connie, however handicapped by a wasting disease, possibly be sorry for himself? There were moments, of course, like the moment just past, when he wondered if her loving attention involved any serious effort, and then he felt guilty and frightened and had to ask for reassurance. Always she gave it to

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him, telling him with a smile that she wouldn't have it any different.

And always, then, he reminded himself that he would do the same for her if it was the other way round, and for a time felt better.

Humming to herself, Connie Curzon walked briskly along the lane, pausing only when she reached the first of the village shops—a travel agent's—where, as usual, she scanned the window for the latest in cruise offers and package holidays. Not that she would need to holiday cheaply if she was able to holiday at all, Connie reflected as she always did; she had her father's money. But while Claude was alive she would never leave him.

With a small sigh she walked on to the grocer's, where the proprietress, at the till and temporarily without custom, brightened as she saw her.

"Mrs. Curzon, good morning! And how is your husband?"

"Holding his own, Mrs. Hunter, holding his own." Connie picked up a wire basket, then half a dozen free-range eggs.

"Has this young man started yet?" Mrs. Hunter inquired.

Connie added a couple of tins of baked beans. "He's coming to meet Claude tomorrow afternoon, and then it'll be up to Claude. He's a bit uneasy at the way Danny and I met, but a male nurse is a male nurse however you discover him."

"Chatted you up, then, Mrs. Curzon, did he?" Mrs. Hunter asked facetiously.

Connie giggled as she helped herself to butter. "Well, yes, he did. But as he explained to me when we'd got talking, he prefers working as a freelance with a lot of little irons in the fire, and he's got into the way of making the most of any opportunity. Like sitting next to an elderly lady on a bus once a week."

"Go on with you, Mrs. Curzon!"

And certainly, standing there smiling, with her stylishly cut pepper-and-salt hair and pert features, the picture Connie Curzon presented was not that of an elderly lady.

"He's bringing references," she said. "It'll be all as it should be."

"I'm sure it will, Mrs. Curzon. And if the young man and your husband take to one another, then maybe you'll be able to get out a bit more."

"Maybe. For the time being, I'll just be glad he won't be on his own when I go over to my sister's." Connie's basket as she put it in front of Mrs. Hunter now also contained a loaf, a cucumber, and a small bag of tomatoes.

"But you'll have lost your travelling companion!" Mrs. Hunter protested, facetious again. "Your husband's gain will be your loss, Mrs. Curzon!"

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Both women burst out laughing. "I hadn't seen it that way," Connie said when she was able.

"And what about the lad's job in town?" Mrs. Hunter wiped her streaming eyes.

"That's coming to an end, so I'd have lost my companion anyway. It's all worked out very neatly. Provided Claude likes Danny."

"I'm sure he will, seeing that you do; the two of you are so close. That's just four pounds fifty pence, Mrs. Curzon."

Connie hadn't told Mr. Bold, the butcher, about Danny, but he knew.

"When's this young man starting, then, Mrs. C?"

"He's coming to meet my husband tomorrow." Connie didn't bother to ask Mr. Bold where his information had come from: Candale wasn't a commuter village and everyone was interested in everyone else and shared what news they had.

"Hope it works out for you, you deserve a break."

"I'm happy as I am, Mr. Bold."

"I know, I know." The butcher tucked two pork chops and some bacon down the side of Connie's basket. "You're a good woman."

It was only at the fishmonger's, where the boy who served her was new, that the exchanges were limited to business.

As she walked home, Connie decided it would be sensible to leave the men to have tea on their own when Danny came the next afternoon. And she wouldn't mind seeing the latest Jane Austen film that was on in town. . . .

Detective Chief Inspector Jim Bellamy of Lanceton CID was so deeply asleep when the telephone rang that until his wife prodded him the bell was part of his dream. Groping for the instrument was like coming back from the dead.

"Bellamy . . ." He had to clear his throat and try again. "Bellamy!"

"It's Sergeant Pringle, sir. There's been a murder in Candale. Number Four, The Close. That's where I'm ringing from."

"So that's where I'll see you, Sergeant. Toute suite."

The DCI rang Detective Constable Beveridge, dressed quickly, kissed his wife, and went out onto his front step. It was raining and windy and a quarter past four. Fortunately for Bellamy's temper, DC Beveridge lived in Candale. They were there in ten minutes.

The uniform took them upstairs first, filling them in as they climbed, then into the downstairs room where the husband still lay in bed, screened from the lights and the quietly working forensics team by a plastic sheet that had been anchored each side to

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the nearest pieces of high furniture. Bellamy entered the small dazzle-free area and heard a quavering whisper.

"I wish he'd killed me, too."

"Don't talk like that, sir."

Bellamy had grown accustomed over the years to distressing sights, but he was shocked by the look of the man lying prone in the bed that was so incongruous in what, despite its disarray, was clearly a dining room. Skeletal, yellow, anguished, the eyes already as deep and dark as the holes they must surely soon leave in the skull . . . the DCI pulled himself together. The man was alive as yet, and suffering.

"Why didn't he?" Claude Curzon tried to struggle upright, and on a reflex action the DCI bent down to plump his pillows. "I mean . . . Look . . ."

"Whoever it was came in here. Yes, sir." On his way across the room, Bellamy had scrunched on glass and registered the overturned chairs and lamp, the pictures at crazy angles or on the ground, the fresh scratches on the long side table, the smears of blood.

"The silver's gone. Why didn't he—"

The DCI cleared his throat for the second time that early morning. "Probably because you didn't move, sir. Your wife, you see, left her bedroom, came out onto the landing. . . ."

"So he stuck a knife into her."

"I'm afraid so, sir." Bellamy was ashamed of his relief that the poor old sod had been told of his wife's death and had taken it in prior to his arrival. He'd make a written commendation of Sergeant Pringle's devotion to duty. "Because she'd seen him. She wouldn't have known anything about it," the DCI added swiftly, on another reflex. "It was straight to the heart."

The man's dry sob went straight to Bellamy's own heart, so that he put an involuntary hand against his chest. "I'm so very sorry, sir. Now, the thing will be to take you into hospital for a while. Until you get over the shock and decide what you want to do."

The DCI didn't find it too hard to accept the hospital's edict that the old boy wouldn't be up to answering questions until late in the day; he'd already indicated that he wouldn't be able to come up with any answers. And Candale was a real village; the police might well get some answers there and they could start on it right away. . . .

By the time he was allowed at Curzon's bedside, Bellamy had learned all about the young man the murdered woman had introduced into her home.

"The killer let himself in through your back door, sir. Does anyone apart from you and your wife have a back-door key?"

"No, Chief Inspector." The old boy looked even more frail and

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skeletal than he had looked in the night, and Bellamy was impressed at his precision, would have been impressed if the man had got no further than *Inspector* or even *Officer*. And the light showing deep down in the caverns of his eyes was the light of intelligence, vibrant with suffering. To his surprise, Bellamy found himself putting his hand over the thin yellow one lying on the sheet.

"Just take it gently," he said, shuffling his chair a shade nearer.

"Thank you. Our neighbours have a front-door key, but there are only the two for the back door." The eyes closed for a moment. "But another one could be cut, couldn't it, Chief Inspector?"

"It could, yes. Which brings me to ask you—"

"A couple of days ago my wife brought a young man to see me. She'd met him . . . He was a male nurse and she wanted someone to be with me once a week when she goes—went"—the eyes closed again—"to town to visit her sister. But she didn't want to take him on if I didn't like him, and so she left us together over a tea tray. . . ."

"Yes?" the DCI prompted. He was appalled to see tears suddenly running down the yellow cheeks.

"She made the tea," Claude Curzon whispered, "and brought it in to us in the dining room before going out. When we'd finished, the young man took the tray out to the kitchen and washed the dishes. That's where the back door is . . ."

"Has there been anyone else—unaccustomed—who's visited your house lately, Mr. Curzon?"

"No. No one. No one at all." The man paused again. "During the daytime we leave the back-door key in the lock."

"So it would have been a simple matter for the young man to take an impression of it. What did he say his name was, Mr. Curzon?"

"Danny Baines."

"Address?"

The mouth twisted into the parody of a smile. "He told my wife he was staying temporarily with a friend. Not on the phone. He made the calls. Chief Inspector . . ."

"Take it easy, now." The man was trying to sit up. Again Bellamy punched his pillows into a better shape.

"What I must tell you . . . You mustn't think my wife was foolish, she was a very shrewd and intelligent woman. She met this lad on the bus, yes, but they travelled together for months, had coffee in the bus station when they were waiting for the ride back to Candale, and she thought she'd got to know him. Well enough, anyway, to let me meet him and see what I thought."

"And what did you think, Mr. Curzon?"

"I rather liked him, Chief Inspector." This time there was irony in the smile. "And he did have references. One from the general hospital and three from private employers."

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"Which you took up?"

"My wife got in touch with the hospital and one of the employers. They both spoke highly of the boy."

"Of Danny Baines," the DCI corrected.

"Just so, Chief Inspector." The ironic smile again.

"You say you liked the lad, sir. So you didn't feel at all—wary? You were prepared to take him on?"

"I was. I thought my wife had done very well. . . ." This time it was the whole face that twisted up, the mouth a rictus of agony, the eyes imploring Bellamy to veil their inward vision. Not that the poor sod had had to identify his wife, her sister had done that. "Chief Inspector . . . you're certain she didn't suffer?"

"Absolutely, sir. Death was instantaneous."

"Aah." Slowly the face relaxed. "I don't think you'll catch him," Curzon murmured. "I think he'll have slipped away."

Bellamy didn't catch him, didn't even get a lead. Connie Curzon's jewellery had been stolen and he'd been hopeful there, but no single piece of it ever turned up, and the bit of dining-room silver they discovered was a dead end. The real Danny Baines lived and worked in London, was easily found and easily able to prove the theft of his references from his ground-floor flat during a six-month-old robbery which had left no fingerprints. He also proved he had been at work on the afternoon a young man using his name had had tea with Claude Curzon, and that he had been in bed with his girlfriend the night of the murder.

There were some half-wiped and unuseable fingerprints on the Curzons' tea tray, but none apart from the Curzons' and their daily help's anywhere else in the house, which wouldn't have been hard to achieve even when the lad had had to move around bare-handed on his first visit, with the house being so cosily endowed with fabric—not a wooden chair arm to be seen except at the dining table—and the fact that there was always a pair of rubber gloves hanging in sight for the washing-up. . . . Bellamy was afraid for a while that his frustration was making him ill, and it took long, serious talks with both his wife and his superior officer to snap him out of his obsession with the Curzon murder case.

He managed it eventually, and without his other work suffering too badly, but he never quite got over that particular impasse, and when, twelve months later, he received an invitation from the widower to visit him in a local nursing home, he was as nervously excited as a schoolboy on his first date.

Claude Curzon didn't look any worse, which anyway would scarcely have been possible—and now there was a feverish light in the deep, dark eyes. A light of hope, Bellamy recognized with a fresh stab of excitement. Curzon had remembered something. . . .

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"Mr. Curzon, I've wondered . . . How are you?"

"Dying." But the man was smiling. "And glad to be."

"The doctor said you were stable—"

"The mind can kill as well as the body, Chief Inspector."

"I don't doubt it." Bellamy sat down on the small chair drawn up beside the chaise longue on which the invalid lay. "Why did you want to see me?"

"Because there's no one else. Lordy, that's a backhander, isn't it, Chief Inspector? I'm sorry. I only meant that what I have to say to you would have been said to a member of my family or a close friend if there'd been one."

"You're not an old man, Mr. Curzon, you must still have some family and friends."

"Acquaintances. You see, Mr. Bellamy, Connie and I were so close, so self-sufficient, perhaps all the more so with not having children, we didn't seem to need friends, acquaintances sufficed. And no, I don't have family of my own and I can't talk to Connie's." The eyes closed, and it was more of a shock this second time to see the sudden tears. "You were kind," the man murmured.

"I was sorry. So here I am. Do you want to tell me something that could help me solve the murder?" But Bellamy's excitement was easing off as he began to fear that all Curzon wanted was a friendly chat.

"Yes, I want to confess to it. I killed my wife, Mr. Bellamy. To be precise, I arranged her murder." Curzon's eyes seemed to rise from the depths of their dark sockets as they stared intently into the DCI's, and for the first time Bellamy saw that they were a very dark blue. "I'm not telling you as a policeman," Curzon went on, "but if you make use of it as a policeman it's all the same to me. I haven't a lot of time, so don't let's waste it in my trying to convince you. Believe me now, and I'll explain the whys and wherefores."

"I thought you loved your wife, Mr. Curzon." An unpoliceman-like response to a confession of murder, but Bellamy's first reaction, absurdly, was to a personal affront, and he found himself remembering a book he had read in his teens, where the hero he had come to identify with had been revealed at the end as the villain. But the old boy had talked about the mind as a killer; his must have begun to let him down, delude him . . .

"I did, God help me. And I thought she loved me. But when this lad—it's easiest to go on calling him Danny, isn't it, Mr. Bellamy?—when Danny came to tea, he told me that what my wife had really hired him for was to put a pillow over my face in the night. She'd given him a back-door key—he showed it to me. Part of his payment was to be the dining-room silver, and anything else he wanted from the house except her jewellery."

Bellamy kept telling himself it couldn't be true, but he had to go

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along with it. "How had your wife got round to asking the boy to do—such a terrible thing? What could have made her think that he would? She would have been taking a dreadful risk."

"My wife had a talent for finding people out, discovering their strengths and weaknesses. I'd seen it at work many times during our marriage, and it was formidable."

"But to take it that far . . ."

"She really wanted to be rid of me, didn't she, Chief Inspector?" Curzon smiled again, armoured now in his sense of irony.

"But . . . You loved each other." Before uttering it, Bellamy would have believed himself incapable of so childish a comment.

"So I thought. But according to the lad she couldn't wait for my demise. I don't know—and thank God I can't find out—if it had been like that for a long time, or just since she'd been forced to become my nurse."

"Could you have afforded paid nurses?"

"Oh, yes. But Connie was always one for appearances, and it wouldn't have looked good in a village like ours if she hadn't been in regular attendance herself. No, murder was her only way out. For years I worshipped a murderess-in-waiting, Chief Inspector, and the week she was going to have me killed she still looked at me with love."

"A mercy killing?" Bellamy suggested, on a surge of hope.

Again the ironic smile. "I told her regularly that as long as she was with me life was worth living, and she knew I've never been in really bad pain. And the doctor had said I was stable. Just before Connie introduced me to Danny."

There was no more to be said on a personal level, no comfort to be given. And even if there had been, a man so crazily obsessed wouldn't have been able to accept it. "Tell me about it," Bellamy gently invited.

"I took to the boy, God help me, and I sensed he took to me, at least was sorry for me and perhaps found me interesting. As you know, I've written a few thrillers and it turned out they're his favourite reading—whatever he was, he was literate. Perhaps that was my salvation. Salvation!" Curzon repeated, with a laugh Bellamy found shocking. "When I'm in the worst torment I've ever known. Anyway, he told me—what Connie had asked him to do, and that when he'd agreed she'd paid him half the three thousand pounds she'd promised him. The sum wasn't all that great," Curzon went on, following Bellamy's long-drawn-out whistle, "for someone with as much money as Connie had in her own right. It's come to me, by the way. That's why I can end up in these rather nice surroundings." Bellamy looked out of the window, down a long stretch of tended lawn edged with exotic trees and bushes. "Unless, of course, you take me away.

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"The boy said he liked me better than he liked Connie," Curzon continued, "and offered to kill her instead of me for the second leg of his payment—another one thousand five hundred pounds." Curzon paused, and Bellamy looked down the garden again as he waited.

"I agreed," Curzon took up at last. "In self-defence, I agreed to the murder of my wife. I wrote him a cheque."

"You were so sure he was telling the truth."

"He'd shown me Connie's cheque as well as the back-door key. And when I told her that night I'd be happy to take the lad on, I saw it in her smile. Not that it mattered to her whether I liked Danny or not: According to her plans, he'd learned how the land lay, and the next time he came I wouldn't be expecting him."

"But you were. What happened?"

"Danny let himself into the house as we'd arranged—as my wife had arranged—then went straight upstairs as *I'd* arranged. She hadn't expected that and came out of her room. . . . And I lay there letting her die." Bellamy had to brace himself against the sob. "Then he came downstairs and into the dining room and up to my bed, and we looked at each other and he nodded. At least he'd put the knife away, but I could see the blood on his gloves and his jacket by the streetlight; it glistened. . . . He took most of the silver, and I gave him the time he needed to get well away, just lying thinking about her dead upstairs on the landing. My Connie! Then reminding myself that what she really was was my monster. My monster mate, because I was a monster now, too. . . . And I'd made the wrong decision, Mr. Bellamy. I should have told the boy to go ahead with Connie's plan; if he'd killed me, he'd have killed my knowledge that she hated me. As it is, I've turned the last part of my life into a living hell. Not the hell of guilt at having killed my wife. That's bad enough, but I've eased it already by confessing it to you. Nothing can ease the hell of knowing that the wife I loved planned my death. And I condemned myself to it." Curzon sat upright again. A pink spot burned the centre of each yellow cheek, and his eyes were frantic.

He was mad, of course, the murder of his wife had sent him mad. Relief flowed over the DCI, followed by a terrible pity. All he could wish for Curzon now was the end he craved.

"What's the latest from the doctors on your condition, Mr. Curzon?"

"They tell me it's about to kill me at last, Mr. Bellamy. Glory halleluiah. So I won't have to carry my burden for very much longer."

"Mr. Curzon . . . Psychiatric help can ease—"

The smile this time was a grin. "You don't believe me, do you, Chief Inspector? So, could I trouble you to bring my stick over to me? In the corner there . . . Thank you."

The stick was a handsome object, Bellamy thought, as he

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handed it to Curzon. Shiny black with a dog's head for a handle. And a gold band halfway down.

Curzon was twisting the stick where the band was, but nothing was happening. "It was always stiff," he said, handing the stick back to Bellamy. "And when I decided to make use of it I was glad. No one but Connie and I knew that it opens. Will you have a try please, Chief Inspector? Ah!" he said with satisfaction, as in Bellamy's strong hands the stick twisted apart. "Just tip the lower half onto the bed, if you will. There you are! Recognize this, Mr. Bellamy? The lad stole them to make my wife's death look robbery-related, but it was part of our deal that he hand them over to me. He put them in the stick for me, which explains the blood. You'll want to check them, of course."

Of course, but the Chief Inspector didn't need to. Although he had never seen Connie Curzon's jewellery before, he knew it by heart.

As he stared at it he found himself with a second wish for the widower: that he would die before it occurred to him that the young man his wife had invited to tea might be a liar and a forger as well as a murderer and a thief. O

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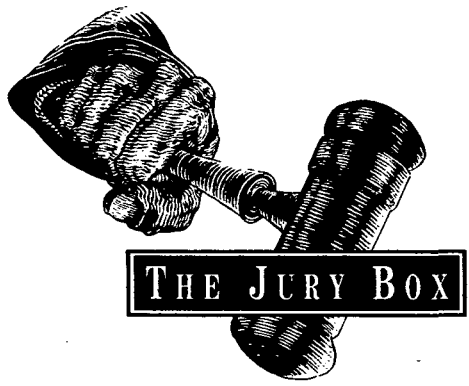

by Jon L. Breen

Sometimes a novel's title will send an extra message to its readers. When Richard Stark (Donald E. Westlake) brought back his career thief Parker after a near quarter-century absence, the book was called *Comeback* (1997). Agatha Christie dimmed the lights on Hercule Poirot in a book called *Curtain* (1975). The most unsubtle commemoration by title must be Brett Halliday's *Michael Shayne's Fiftieth Case* (1964). Cyril Hare's last novel, published in the year of his death, was *He Should Have Died Hereafter* (1958), known in the United States by the equally portentous *Untimely Death.*

Sometimes the messages prove misleading. When the Ellery Queen team (writing as Barnaby Ross) brought their secondary sleuth's career to a halt in *Drury Lane's Last Case* (1933), they stuck to it, but *The Finishing Stroke* (1958) did not close the books on sleuth Ellery as originally planned. E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913) actually brought us journalist-detective Philip Trent's first case, while John Mortimer's *Rumpole's Last Case* (1987) happily proved to be a false alarm. Ngaio Marsh's 1977 title *Last Ditch* sounded like a farewell, but she went on to produce three more Roderick Alleyn novels before dying in 1982 at age 86. It remains to be seen whether Ed McBain's *The Last Best Hope* (1998) actually will end the career of lawyer-detective Matthew Hope, but I doubt that the title of his fiftieth 87th Precinct book means what it implies. On the other hand, a pretty clear message is conveyed by the title of the new novel by Dick Francis, whose publication of a short story collection, *Field of Thirteen* (1998), was reported and widely understood as signaling his retirement from novel-writing.

***Dick Francis: *Second Wind,* Putnam, $24.95. B.B.C. weathercaster Perry Stuart travels to Florida to join a manic-depres-

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sive colleague's latest adventure: flying into a hurricane. An opening chapter at Newmarket involving the mysterious illness of a great two-year-old filly provides the obligatory horse racing element. This isn't the best Francis, but the author's style, sense of story, and way with character leave fans to hope his second wind is good for many more novels.

***Ed McBain: *The Last Dance,* Simon and Schuster, $25. An elderly man's apparent suicide begins to look like murder to 87th cops Steve Carella and Meyer Meyer; Bert Kling's latest romance is an interracial one; and Fat Ollie Weeks, revolting and bigoted cop of a neighboring precinct has the largest part I can remember. This is about average as 87th Precinct novels go; longtime readers won't need to be told how good that is.

***John Maddox Roberts: *Saturnalia (SPQR V),* St. Martin's, $23.95. The unique Roman holiday of the title, wherein slaves and masters trade places for a day, is the backdrop for the latest murder investigation of Decius Caecilius Metellus, off-white sheep of a notable family. In style, humor, and historical research, Roberts equals the better-known Steven Saylor and Lindsey Davis, both of whom he preceded as a writer of Roman detective fiction. That the mystery plot slows down to allow more richly-described details of Roman life may frustrate some, but others won't find it a drawback at all.

***Tony Hillerman: *Hunting Badger,* HarperCollins, $26. The killing of law officers at an Indian casino precipitates a massive search, once again putting the Navajo Tribal Police in uneasy collaboration with the F.B.I. and other agencies. In an opening note, Hillerman reveals that a real 1998 manhunt inspired his fiction. The series about Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee has subtly changed in recent entries: There's more humor; Jim Chee is far more talkative; and the whole enterprise is mellower and more relaxed. The Leaphorn-Chee relationship occasionally recalls Charlie Chan and number-one-son.

***Sara Hoskinson *Frommer: The Vanishing Violinist,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Jane Spencer, small-town amateur sleuth of three previous novels, faces a common parental experience: checking out her daughter's suddenly-introduced fiancé, a charming and gifted violinist—but is he all he seems? The rich background, a quadrennial violin competition held in Indianapolis, combines with a strong puzzle and involving, mostly likable characters to create an enjoyable reading experience. Widow Joan's own romantic interest, as is true of so many cozy heroines, is a cop.

Those who can't read enough about the world's most notorious serial killer will want to

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seek out Stephen Wright's *Jack the Ripper: An American View* (Mystery Notebook Editions, P.O. Box 1341, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1341; $25 trade paper). Though Wright isn't the most elegant or best organized writer to offer a study of the Whitechapel killer, he does provide a basic account of the crimes, some intriguing quotes and sidelights, and an apparently original suspect.

Truth in reviewing: I'm a contributor to the following two volumes but won't let that stop me from recommending them. *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (Oxford University Press, $49.95), edited by Rosemary Herbert with Catherine Aird, John M. Reilly, and consulting editor Susan Oleksiw, includes not only the entries you might expect in a mystery reference book—those on famous authors, detectives, subgenres, and terms—but such topical essays as "Addresses and Abodes, Famous," "Double Bluff," "Hotel Milieu," "Racism," "Royal Canadian Mounted Police," and "Voyeurism." Distinguished contributors include novelists Julian Symons, H. R. F. Keating, Harold Q. Masur, Sarah Caudwell, Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, and Max Allan Collins; and critics Marvin Lachman, B. A. Pike, Donald A. Yates, Douglas G. Greene, Peter Lewis, and J. Randolph Cox.

For any more-than-casual devotee of this magazine or its founding editor, the book of the year has to be Ellery Queen's *The Tragedy of Errors and Others* (Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 limited hardcover). Slightly under half the book consists of fiction, beginning with Frederic Dannay's detailed outline for a never-completed Queen novel. With its ingenious puzzle and ambitious theme, it might have made a fine addition to the saga had not EQ's other half, Manfred B. Lee, died in 1971 before he could expand it into its final form. The novelette "Terror Town," in which the character Ellery does not appear, is followed by six previously uncollected short-shorts. (The last of these, "The Reindeer Clue," was actually written by Edward D. Hoch.) The rest of the volume consists of 22 tributes and biographical-critical essays that show how important to the mystery field, not to mention their friends and families, these two remarkable men were. Among the contributors: Douglas and Richard Dannay, Rand B. Lee, Francis M. Nevins, James Yaffe, Catherine Aird, Michael Gilbert, and *EQMM*'s present editor Janet Hutchings. The publishers, who are not really the two historical murderers on the logo but Douglas and Sandi Greene, have produced the most significant tome yet in their admirable publishing program.

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Art by Allen Davis

VANISHED AS SHE SANG

by Clayton Emery

"... Aye, I've made more men into ghosts than any freebooter on the American Main, an' I done it with these!" The drunkard jerked a pistol and waved it around the tavern.

Fishermen and barmaids froze while the sea captain rattled on, "I've buried gold from Ocracoke Island to the Penobscot, and I always pitch a dead man atop m'chest to guard it! Anyone goes sniffing after my treasure'll get his top lights plucked! Ahoy, where's the beggar-maker? I'm dry! More rumbo! *You!* Stir yer stumps, you blatherskitin' scarecrow, 'fore I blow your guts out!"

"Aye aye, captain," said Joseph Fisher. Kelly, the tavern keeper, had slipped out the door awhile back, and the barmaids were too terrified to approach the table, so the student propped his mop and hooked a redware jug off the bar.

The pistol centered between Joseph's eyes as he poured rum punch into the pirate's mug, which was solid gold and ringed with rubies. The Brescia was filigreed with silver, the muzzle big as a man's thumb and worn paper-thin from thousands of shots. Its owner growled, "D'ja ever hear that I shoot some of my own crew

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now and then to remind 'em who's captain?"

"Just what I'd expect of Blackbeard," returned Joseph. "How else did you become the Terror of Tortuga, the Curse of the Caribbean, and the Satan of the Sea Lanes? You're the most famous and fearsome pirate on the high seas!"

"Ye've got that right! Drink to the devil and have done with the rest!" Blackbeard hoisted his mug. " 'Cept Satan never run off a British frigate!"

"Ran off a frigate!" Joseph feigned amazement. "Ah, but your pipe's gone out. Shall I fetch a light?"

"Eh? Oh, aye, hop to't." To hold his mug and fire his pipe, Blackbeard had to drop the pistol on the gummy table. Joseph fetched candlewood from the hearth and cupped the flame while the pirate puffed. Discreetly, Joseph spun the pistol with his elbow so the bore pointed at the wall. The tavern's patrons relaxed.

"This story is based in history," writes author Clayton Emery. "The action takes place on New Hampshire's Isles of Shoals, tiny knobs of rock that have seen shipwrecks and pirates. Blackbeard really did honeymoon there with his seventh wife. The islands are deserted now, but people say the ghost of Blackbeard's wife still walks the shore. From time to time, someone finds Spanish doubloons in the surf." †

Drawing deep, Blackbeard blew smoke and rumbled, "Where was I? The frigate! We'd just boarded a scow full of coal off Hispaniola . . ."

Sprawled in a creaking chair, the pirate dominated the room like a thundercloud. Well over six feet tall, weighing more than eighteen stone, he wore a mariner's wide hat, a full-skirted black coat with gold buttons, and across his massive chest a leather sling holding five more pistols. His ugly sun-blasted face was wreathed by hair and beard black and shiny as coal and braided with bright ribbons for shoregoing. By contrast, Joseph Fisher was slight, pale, and sunken-eyed, in snuff-brown clothes and broken shoes. His only color was long brown hair and bright red spots at his cheekbones that told why he could ignore a drunkard's pistol: It was hard to frighten a man cursed with consumption.

With the day done, the door admitted salty Atlantic wind and ever more islanders, until the tavern reeked of sweat, fish, rum, tobacco, and woodsmoke from a fitful Rumford fireplace. Fishermen wore shaggy red Monmouth caps, thick sweaters, and leather jerkins shiny with mackerel scales, while a few slatterns wore men's castoffs and clogs and rags wrapped around their ankles. Aside from the three barmaids, the only well-dressed woman sat

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with Blackbeard, in red water-silk hemmed with gold lace, a yellow bonnet, and a cloak of dark green lined with satin. Beautiful and tall, she was barely twenty, with eyes wide and vacant. Joseph thought her a Portsmouth whore half-blind from liquor, though she'd drunk only small beer.

Though packed, the tavern was quiet, for none dared talk while the famous pirate spun his endless stories and laughed at his own jokes. Fishermen laughed along, for the pirate again toyed with his pistol as well as his pipe.

". . . 'Fore we boarded, I wove slow match into my beard and stuck more up under my hat, and lit 'em all around. T'Jesuits thought I was Satan himself with my hair afire and pistols barking! My slabaroons took turns ridin' 'em round the mainmast like hobbyhorses and spanking 'em with cutlasses! The master feigned he din't speak the Queen's English, but I made 'im understand! I stood his mates along the gunwale and shot each one like knocking pigeons off a fence. Still the captain wouldn't talk, so I throttled him with my bare hands and fin'lly cracked his head 'gainst the foremast! He spewed brains all o'er my deck, and holystonin' be damned! I—"

"An' that's your best crack at making a man spill his guts?" interrupted a nasal voice.

Heads turned like cod in a school. Only the wind hissed around the door and shutters as Blackbeard growled, "Who said that?"

"I did! Ned Low, cap'n of the *Montcova!*"

Joseph Fisher peered through blue smoke. He'd seen the party come in—four hard-eyed, trouble-hungry men—and displace fishermen from a table. The leader was a beardless youth with a Roman nose, wearing a shapeless hat, a coat with filthy lace, and wrinkled leg wrappings. Mismatched pistols and a rusty cutlass jammed his silk sash.

"Captain?" asked Blackbeard with surprising mildness. "What've you ever took that a puppy couldn't drag out of the tidewrack?"

"I've took plenty!" sneered the young Low. "Thirteen ships in six months, and that don't count fishboats! Ned Low'll be a bigger name than Captain Kidd afore long!"

"Kidd? Boston hired that Sea William to catch *me,* and all 'e did was brain his own mate with a bucket and get turned off the ladder!" Blackbeard waggled his pistol, making Joseph and others shy back. "See here, green-hemp! I've took more ships and killed more men than inhabit these islands, so log some leagues before you anchor your arse at Blackbeard's table, ye puking puddling!"

"I don't need your company, old man, or your counsel!" The young man's face flushed. "I don't play with men, I make 'em feared!"

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"Oh? How's that, *boy?*"

"You make one man talk by tormenting another!" insisted Ned Low. "Y'pick three prisoners, one of 'em the quartermaster or purser, the man who knows 'is stuff. You ask the first one, Where's the goods? Before he can say anythin', you blow his head off or ram a boarding pike through his lights. Then you asks the second, Where is it? He blithers, but you just kill 'im. Now the purser's cryin' to tell you the solemn truth! Promise to let 'im live, and he'll tell you 'bout his mother's birthmarks! And when you *do* kill him, he's the most surprised bloke afloat!" The young rakehell and his cutthroats laughed.

Tormented himself by smoke and foul air, Joseph Fisher rubbed his chest and reflected he should stay outdoors. But he was intrigued. While he discredited most of Blackbeard's alleged atrocities as braggadocio, Ned Low's chilling claims rang true, as if the man sailed for torture and not treasure.

"It's watchin' and waitin' scares a man!" Ned Low ranted. "'s best friend gets his privy parts sawed off with a blunt knife, he prays to God he ain't next! I once cut off a master's ears and nose and made the first mate eat 'em, then cut open his belly to show he'd done it! Then I tied both to their own mast and fired the lot!"

"I recollect ye now," rumbled Blackbeard. "You fly distress flags and dress as women to lure merchanters. Ye press fishermen and threaten to hang 'em 'less they jump up and down and curse the name of Cotton Mather. So ye're a codswallop as well as a coward."

Eyes starting, Ned Low ground his jaw. "At least I ain't a jackweight sheepshead who couldn't cross a quarterdeck in a southeast squall!"

Blackbeard puffed his pipe. "Ye're a liar, too." And fired his pistol.

Joseph's ears were boxed by the explosion. Everyone jumped, and only Ned Low's youth saved him. Quick as a snake, the boy hurled his chair backwards as the pistol ball punched a hole in the wall. Blackbeard vaulted from his chair, his hat brushing the ceiling beams. One of Low's pirates drew a knife, lunged, and stabbed, but the giant waded in so the blade fetched in his thick coat, then he hammered his pistol on the man's head. Another villain flashed a cutlass, but Blackbeard grabbed the blade at the hilt and snapped it off, then punched him flat. Before Ned Low and the last lotman could even rise, Blackbeard flipped the table on them and stamped hard as if crushing rats.

Squirming free, Ned Low scurried for the door. Bawling like a bull, Blackbeard jerked and cocked a pistol while snatching up the spilled table, which he flung the length of the room. Maple split against the jamb as Ned Low pelted outside. Blackbeard jumped

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to the doorway and fired his pistol into the wind, jerked another and fired again, then stood glaring while smoke blew back to wreathe his face. Turning, Blackbeard grabbed the pirates by their belts and pitched them outside, then slammed the door.

In a stunned pause, Joseph Fisher yelled, "Three cheers for Captain Blackbeard! Hip hip, huzzah!" Patrons joined in, and the towering pirate actually smiled, a ghastly sight, as he holstered his pistols and crashed in his seat. Flinging Joseph a fat coin that proved to be a louis d'or, he bellowed, "Rumbo for everyone!"

Roistery rose as barmaids bustled and fishermen hoisted. Blackbeard drained his gold mug while his star-eyed consort leaned and whispered. The pirate grinned lecherously. "Is 'at so? Aye, bonny! Eh? Ahoy, s'anyone here read French?"

Chopping sugar, Joseph called, "I read French."

Blackbeard spat on the floor and relit his pipe with flint and steel. "I pinched this off some Frogs. What's't say?"

The big man lobbed his golden goblet, which Joseph almost bobbled because of its weight. Joseph translated an inscription, "'For His Most Catholic Majesty King Louis the Fourteenth, Praise from His Faithful Subjects in Martinique.' Impressive! You should send his majesty a cup inscribed with your name to bind you as brothers: the King of France and the King of the Atlantic."

"By the Lord Harry, I've half a mind to do't! It'd cramp the papist bastard's bowels, worrying if my pirate fleet'd come calling on royalty!" Blackbeard roared with laughter and his woman tittered as he staggered to his feet and took her hand as if entering a minuet. "Come along, my dear. And you, Jack Adams, join us."

"Aye aye, captain." Joseph surprised himself with his easy obedience, but Blackbeard exuded authority like a king. He abandoned the bar to the barmaids.

An islander burst in at the door. "Knife fight! Trulls knife-fightin'!" Shoalers boiled from the room to see, and the trio followed.

Blackbeard and Joseph immediately looked windward, where the gray sky was undershot by white mist. In the narrow street, inside a ring of shouting men, two women shuffled and swiped with fish knives. One was slashed across the shoulder and the other lacked a hank of greasy brown hair. Drunk, they screeched and spat, "bitch," "bawd," and "scold" being their mildest epithets.

"Here now, cease that skirlin'! My goody don't like to see blood!" The biggest man on the island, Blackbeard bulled through the crowd and batted with both hands. Clouted across the head, the women flopped in flurries of skirts. Fishermen huffed in disgust and turned back to the tavern. The pirate swung for the shore, Joseph in tow. The student commented, "'In His will is our peace.'"

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The Isles of Shoals were tiny fractured rocks set hard in the teeth of the Atlantic, yet men crowded onto them to take "dun fish," the richest cod in the world. Star Island was a ragged half-mile of rude paths, salt-streaked huts and clapboard cottages, gardens of wild anemones and dogtooth violets, a brick meetinghouse and stone blockhouse, stacks of cordwood and lobster traps and hogsheads, seine nets and sails hung to dry, fish houses jutting outward on piers, and running everywhere in between the drying racks called flakes, where the east wind set the cod fillets shivering and jittering. The wind rattled roofs, and whipped spume from the surf, and made red-winged blackbirds kite close to the ground. Joseph mused, "'Wind in the east, bad for man and beast.'"

As the sun set, weary fishermen heaved bulging nets and baskets onto a long stone wharf cribbed with red oak. Gosport Harbor was actually a gappy pocket amidst three islands. Fishing boats ringed the harbor—enough wood, seemingly, to bridge to the mainland ten miles "nor'west by north half north" where the Piscataqua split Maine and New Hampshire. Most of the islands stood scarcely twenty feet above the churning ocean, and Joseph often wondered why one rogue wave didn't sweep them clean.

"Row us out, pikestaff," growled Blackbeard. A captain's gig was banked for six oars and a dropped mast, but shallow-drafted enough for one man to row. With his bulk, Blackbeard plumped in the bow while Joseph faced the woman at the stern. Joseph shipped the oars and sculled past Grand Banks ketches, pinks, pinnaces, and shallops. *Queen Anne's Revenge* towered above them all, but her master glowered at a high-castled galleon, filthy and ill-fitted and flying a red skeleton for a Jolly Roger, named *Montcova.* Ned Low's vessel.

Blackbeard's lady spoke. "It must be wonderful to speak a foreign language, sir."

Her voice dripped with southern honey, so she wasn't a local whore dressed up, and the pirate had called her "goody" for "goodwife," so Joseph plied his most respectful tones. "As you say, milady. *'Je parle espagnol à Dieu, italien aux femmes, français aux hommes, et allemand à mon cheval.'* 'I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse.' It's an honor to welcome you to New England, Lady Teach. Might I add, *'Pulchritudo et prudentia conjugere rarae est.'* 'Rarely are beauty and wisdom so joined.'"

"Oh, la! Thank you, bold sir!" A smile lit her violet eyes, which held no more savvy than a rabbit's. "These provincials must be enraptured to greet my husband. It's unlikely such a famous gentleman as Captain Blackbeard has ever visited these parts."

" *'Clarum et venerabile nomen gentibus.'* 'A name illustrious and revered by nations.'" Though privately Joseph doubted that New

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Hampshiremen would turn out to greet Jesus Christ, flattery was the sauce of the day. "Do you enjoy the celebrity of such a famous marriage? The *noblesse* often find the devotion of the *roturiers* a burden."

"Fame hampers the first families, it's true," she chattered, "but my husband remains humble and pious. He's devoted to me, and sees to my welfare, permitting no botherances."

"A lucky woman, and luckier man." Joseph smiled as the lucky husband chuckled. Yet the student wondered how long Blackbeard's devotion would last on this, by some counts, seventh honeymoon. According to legend, he'd shot off the toes of one wife who wouldn't dance for him, and growing tired of others, had locked them in his treasure vault before setting out to sea. Yet this woman seemed oblivious to his fearsome reputation. A mooncalf, then, fey, touched. Like Joseph himself, whom the Abenakis considered a *m'teoulin* blessed with second sight.

"Do you inhabit these isles, good sir? You haven't the look of a fisherman."

Blackbeard snorted. "He's the look of someone washed up by the tide and nibbled by fiddler crabs!"

Joseph chuckled and sculled, slowly, to conserve his short wind. "I don't live anywhere, milady, so one place is good as the next." Joseph had helped a cooper ferry barrel hoops and staves to the islands, but the man had drunk his profits and sailed without him. The student didn't mind, for these islands were reputed to benefit bad lungs. So he swamped in the tavern and explored the rocks and studied a new *Commèdia* by Dante Alighieri, whom Milton had praised. Touring Heaven and Hell and Purgatory, Joseph soaked in late spring sunshine and Italian.

Crabbing across the harbor, the boat's occupants saw islands at all points of the compass. Yet, while Star was crammed with huts and humans and the odd cow, a bigger island at the north lay abandoned. Cottages had collapsed, stone houses bore stove roofs, and only seagulls, sumac, and sheep sprouted. Blackbeard rumbled, "Why don't these muttonheads roost on that island? Is it cursed?"

"Worse, sir," joked Joseph with scant breath. "When the Crown extended the border between these shoals, Hog Island and Smuttynose fell to Massachusetts. The shoalers immediately uprooted to the New Hampshire side of the line. Even the island sheep are truculent, and must be shot for the table."

"My kind of folks," Blackbeard chuckled. "Puritan laws and rates give a man piles."

Joseph steered around the great dripping stern cable into the shadow of the *Revenge* and gently bumped the hull. Blackbeard scaled slippery battens screwed to the side and disappeared

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through the entry port. Joseph expected a bosun's chair to be swung out, but Lady Teach hiked her skirts and climbed too, petticoats poufing. More slowly on worn soles, Joseph clambered after.

"'All hope abandon, ye that enter here.'" The student shivered with delight and fear to venture aboard a pirate ship. The masts were ringed by pikes and spears, the sides were crammed by forty or more cannon, and tarred stays and running rigging soared overhead in dizzying webs till high in the sky flapped a black flag where a horned skeleton stabbed a bleeding heart. Most of the crew had sailed to the bars and whorehouses of wicked Portsmouth in Blackbeard's other ship, *The Flying Scot,* so only a handful idled behind, drinking Barbados rum and smoking Brazilian tobacco: a Negro aprickle with yaws, a one-legged Carib cook, a European who lacked a nose and ears for having once stolen from other pirates. Peering everywhere at once, Joseph passed under a canvas tarpaulin, probably slung to shield Lady Teach's complexion from the sun, and clattered down the aft companionway.

Formerly a French merchantman's, the great cabin boasted reds and blues and gilt lit by a transom of bull's-eye panes, and stank of sour sheets, perfume, liquor, varnish, and cabbage. The hulking Blackbeard filled the cabin until Joseph felt like a seal circling a whale.

Lady Teach excused herself behind a canvas curtain, reminding her husband to nap, but the pirate was distracted by a brown bottle. Pouring brandy into his gold goblet, Blackbeard waved at a chart table hung on chains and littered with documents, candles, bottles, clothes, a sword, and a boot. "We took a French ketch—a 'schooner,' they called it—and lugged barrels of some white muck out'a the hold, but we don't know what 'tis. See if't's in them manifests and I'll give ye a Vigo Crown." Crashing into a folding chair, the pirate mused, "Reminds me of the time we burned down half of Santo Domingo . . ."

Unhurried, Joseph sorted papers: an introduction to business partners, a plea to a wife to light votive candles, clearance by a surgeon at Brest. He wondered if the writers had been marooned or impressed or sunk into the depths. A bill of lading crossed his hand. "Ah. Nineteen hogsheads? Is it alum?"

Blackbeard paused with goblet to mouth. "Egad! I'll bet that's wha 'tis! You dust it on wounds and it stings like fire ants. Bonny! New York'll pay through the nose for't. Every manjack there drips with the clap! I sailed my fleet up the Hudson once . . ." Rising, Joseph poured more brandy while Blackbeard scratched bedbugs and told tales of far-off lands and ferocious battles and close escapes.

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Hours had passed when a sailor cried from above, "Cap'n! Islanders 'longside! Looks like a boardin' party!"

"Boarders?" Blackbeard flew from his seat and clomped up the steep companionway. Joseph trotted to catch up.

The east wind had freshened, so the sky roiled like boiled lead and cat's-paws ticked Blackbeard's broad hat and Joseph's loose hair. Past Star Island, whitecaps burst against a breakwater.

To starboard bobbed a gam of whaleboats crammed with thirty or more fishermen armed with gaffs, boathooks, cutlasses, a blunderbuss, and a few fowlers. An older man stood up in the foremost boat, balanced on rubber knees, and tugged his shaggy cap respectfully. "Ahoy, Captain Blackbeard! Oliver Hunkins, fishin' master! Us shoalers've formed a magistrate's court under Newfoundland Law to ask you a question! Meaning no disrespect, sir, but why's that skiff moored to your hawser?"

"What?" Blackbeard's bawl could have cut through a Hatteras hurricane. "Sheer off, you brown-water bastard, else I drop a roundshot through your strakes! All you corkbrained catsos can . . ." Sulphurous curses smoked the air. Fisherman tugged oars to move out of pistol range, or perhaps to board.

Only Joseph looked aft. Tied to the anchor cable was a tombstone wherry, one of scores dotted around the islands, common as a periwinkle.

The fishing master's face flushed red, but he clung like a barnacle to his question. "Sir, that boat's Phil Babb's! He's one of us, and he's gone missin'! We want to know, did you kill him and pitch his body atop your treasure chest?"

"Are you drunk or daft?" Gallons of liquor had mellowed the pirate, Joseph reckoned, because he argued, not attacked. "Why'n hell would I kill one o' you doddypoll sprats? I ain't killed anyone in most of a fortnight, and them was just Frogs! Who told you about my damned treasure chest?"

"You did," supplied Joseph. Blackbeard whirled as if he'd been stabbed. Alcohol fumes could have blistered paint. "You bragged about always killing a man so his ghost will chase off treasure seekers."

"So, Captain," Hunkins demanded from below, *"have* you buried booty here'bouts?"

"None know that but the devil and m'self!" Blackbeard drew a pistol from his leather sling, perhaps unknowing, but Joseph saw the fishermen stiffen. Standing on his own quarterdeck, Blackbeard had only contempt for a committee of citizens, but Joseph knew fishermen thrived by their skill and muscle, and feared neither God nor the Atlantic, and certainly not pirates. These thirty were poised like hunting dogs with weapons ready. Lady Teach came on deck and fluttered her hands at the prospect of violence.

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It came with a clatter of sea boots as fishermen rushed from behind, having swarmed up the port side.

"By the Lord Harry! Ye'll die on a dunghill!" Blackbeard's roar scared seagulls into flight all over the harbor as he cocked his pistol. Jumping, Joseph Fisher shoved the brawny arm into the air. The Brescia barked and punched a hole in a furled sail. Flinging Joseph wide, Blackbeard knocked down four burly fishermen easily as parting seagrass. The ship's skeleton crew jerked knives like flashes of lightning, but dropped back as Hunkins's blunderbuss blatted. Blackbeard grabbed for another pistol—

—and balked as Joseph Fisher caught it with two cold hands. Dodging a fist, he gabbled, "Captain, please, for your lady's sake! You're outnumbered! *Wait!* I know you're innocent! May I pose a question that will settle it, so we'll have no need to fight?"

Red-rimmed eyes glared, but finally the giant jammed his pistol into his harness. "Very well! Talk to these sea lawyers! But get 'em off my ship, or when my crew docks I'll rake this island with iron, so help me God!"

Panting, Joseph turned to the fishing master. "Mr. Hunkins, I rowed us aboard three hours ago and circled that anchor cable. There was no boat tied on then."

"So?" Hunkins scowled, then, "You were swampin' in the tavern."

"True. But at present I'm sifting privity for Captain Blackbeard. May I study Philip Babb's boat?"

"What for? And why should we listen to you? You're—no one we know."

"True. But—" The student swallowed a sigh of exasperation. Why couldn't men see what they saw? "Your differences hinge on this boat. If Babb's gone missing from it, perhaps it can tell us where, no?"

"I—s'pose." Grizzling, Hunkins ordered two men in a whaleboat to fetch the wherry alongside. Feeling the clumsiest man on the Isles of Shoals, Joseph scaled slimy battens until he hung over churning water, then thumped down into the wherry.

Twenty feet long, it was high-sided, flat-bottomed, and fitted with the local tombstone-shaped sternpost. It was stepped for a mast, but held only a hank of rope, a wooden bailer tied with cordline, and an oar. Above the rising wind, Joseph asked the whaleboatmen, "How do you know this is Babb's boat?"

"We all know it," scoffed a fisherman, and fingered a gouge in the gunwale. "S's'where he cut loose a dogfish with a hatchet."

Joseph touched twin tholepines. "We lack an oar."

One man ventured, "Phil might'a pitched o'erboard when he caught a crab or the wind backed, an' took an oar with 'im."

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The rope tied to the thwart had been cut. "What was fastened here?"

"Anchor. Phil just used a chunk of granite."

"Why would he cut it free?"

"If't snagged on the bottom."

"A rock?"

"T'happens." But both men mumbled at oddities. "Phil wouldn't go out with the wind makin'." "He would if he was rum-running." "Naw . . ."

Again Joseph mounted for the deck. A raindrop struck his eye and made him flinch. He caught the words, ". . . nor wouldn't he run by night wi'at cutter nosing 'bout—"

"Cutter?" Dropping to the deck, he asked Hunkins, "A royal warship?"

Blackbeard barked, "How many guns?"

"Thirty-four," said the fishing master. "'S'not a cutter, actually, 's'a two-deck galley. Holland built her at Newcastle."

"And my crew ashore grapplin' whores and bottles!" groaned the giant. "The governor'll learn for certain!"

Joseph's deep-sunk eyes glowed like candles in a skull and made Hunkins squirm. "Is not Her Majesty's Navy guilty of hailing ships and impressing men whenever they please?"

"When there's a war on," Hunkins conceded.

A fisherman objected, "Means naught to a short-handed bosun." Another added, "They's always a war somewhere."

"So," Joseph concluded, "Philip Babb may have tumbled overboard. Or may have been plucked up by the warship, either pressed or arrested for smuggling. Or may be home in bed."

"He ain't that!" snapped Hunkins. "Stop making up stories! This pirate might've killed him!"

"Or he might not've. And I can prove my premise."

"How?"

"Were the captain to dig up his treasure and exhibit no body, you'd accord his innocence, no?" Agitated, French inflections crept into Joseph's speech.

"I'd . . . have'ta."

"Captain Blackbeard, will you agree? Before anyone comes to harm? And before the royal cutter or a storm makes an appearance? You can always rebury the chest."

"Be damned! They'll divide it amongst themselves and feed my carcass to the crabs!"

"Belay that!" snapped Hunkins. "We ain't after yer red-handed gold! We're honest men an' want nothing but to know what's happened to Phil Babb, our friend!"

Rain blew in, gusting in curtains. The ship heeled and bobbed. Blackbeard looked aloft and below, gauging wind and tide and

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whether his anchorage would hold. Oliver Hunkins waited. Joseph Fisher coughed in the mist. His mind churned with notions and guesses, especially since a space of open water now beckoned in the crowded harbor, but he stayed mum: The waters were murky enough.

Blackbeard shook his black head and sodden ribbons, trying to shake off sleep and drunkenness, but only shedding rain like a sheepdog. "Ver' well, I'll swear to't."

"Where's it buried?" demanded Hunkins.

The pirate pointed aport into wet twilight. "Yon wester isle."

"Londoner's." An uninhabited knob a mile west.

"Now, Olly?" asked a man.

"Tide's ebbed," said Blackbeard. "It's now or wait for the turn."

"We'll go," agreed Hunkins. The fishermen slid overside.

The pirate turned to Lady Teach's panicked stare and gently kissed her hand. "Bide awhile, my queen. I'll return soonest I transact business with these gentlemen." The woman smiled at the nicety but pulled her cloak close about her shoulders. Scaling the battens, Blackbeard dropped into Hunkins's whaleboat and almost swamped it. Though outnumbered thirty to one, no one dared ask for his leather sling of pistols. "Give way, you scurvy rats!"

Cursed with curiosity, and oddly amused that Blackbeard, of all people, should stand accused of murder, Joseph wondered if he could further intrude when a warm hand caught his arm. Blackbeard's wife begged, "Please, good sir, go with them. Aid my husband as you may."

"Madame, I—" Joseph halted. The woman's big eyes, bright as violets and just as senseless, unnerved him. "Yes, ma'am."

Hunkins had tolled off six men for the search party, but first needed to go ashore to fetch lanterns and spades. Gloom gathered while Joseph Fisher huddled and shivered in the whaleboat. Blackbeard sat silent, or else dozed like a wardog before battle. Finally, Hunkins and the fishermen-as-magistrates returned with four pierced-tin lanterns, and the twin sails were hoisted by their firefly flicker.

Snatched by the gusting breeze, the whaleboat whisked into a rain-lashed darkness steepled with gnashing, foaming rocks, and again Joseph marveled at the calm surety of the shoalers. Within minutes he detected a half moon of luminous beach pounded by surf, and thought of Dante. " 'I came into a place void of all light, which bellows like the sea in tempest when it is combated by warring winds.' "

Tiller and sheets were eased, oars dipped, and soon the keel kissed gravel. Blackbeard stepped into foaming surf and strode north up the beach, mounted nigh-invisible rocks where seaweed

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bulbs popped underfoot, then bulled into bayberry and huckleberry bushes that made the fishermen curse. Short of breath and sluefooted, Joseph lagged while rain and spume sluiced down his bare head.

Alone, far in back, he heard a clonking above the hiss of waves and water, an artificial sound. Reasoning he couldn't get lost on such a small island, he veered from Blackbeard's party and scrambled over rocks and seaweed down into a hollow.

Groping in pitch blackness, the student sprained a finger identifying a shallow boat with a furled mast expertly tied to a point of rock and pinned by the wind. It was impossible to be sure, but the craft seemed familiar. For a full minute he pondered, then muttered, "'A great flame follows a tiny spark.'"

Ducking his head against the storm, aiming for pinpricks of light, Joseph stumbled through wiry bushes to where Blackbeard paused on a prominence to get his bearings. The student slipped and caught hold of the pirate's leather sling of pistols. Blackbeard cursed, but Joseph hissed, "Captain! Don't fly straight to your treasure! Diverge elsewhere!"

"What? You're the codfish told me to dig it up!"

"True, but we're not alone on this isle!"

"Which way, Cap'n?" Hunkins's teeth chattered. "By God, mebbe we shoulda waited for sunup!"

Blackbeard swabbed water from his face, announced, "That way!" and marched off steady as a frigate into battle. Fishermen cursed at his backtracking. Joseph used the huge pirate as a shield against the weather. Shivering, with breeches and stockings and shoulders wet to the skin, he fought to suppress the treacherous burbling in his lungs. If he began coughing, he'd erupt in gouts of hot blood, so he swallowed hard, plodded on, and bided his time.

Hunkins yelled above the wind and rain, "Captain! Where the hell are ye leading us?"

"Here!" Blackbeard's roar boomed like cannon fire. "Bring up yer spades! My treasure's —"

"We'll take that!" piped a voice.

Shoalers whirled as from the darkness rushed pirates with Ned Low in the lead. Night lanterns snapped open to reveal Sea Service muskets. Islanders goggled, numb with surprise. Joseph counted eight pirates, as many as would fit in the boat he'd found. *Montcova* couldn't be far off.

"Ned Low, you whoreson!" Blackbeard yanked a Brescia whose silver chasing glistened like lightning. Flint snapped on frizzen— and failed to ignite sodden powder.

"Give up the treasure, Teach, or ye're a dead man!" Ned Low fiddled loose his musket boot and took aim at some shoalers. Yellow-

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orange flame split the night as fishermen hurled themselves flat. Blinded by the flash, Low failed to see he'd hit no one. "We've six more muskets and all a-prime! Show us the treasure!"

"Rot in Hell, whelp!" Blackbeard flexed two great paws to throttle the younger man, who squawked and yelled for another gun. "Your head'll hang from my sprit chains before dawn—"

"G-ghost!" shrieked a pirate.

"Phil's—ghost!" hollered a fisherman.

All saw it.

Rising from the ground, lurching towards Blackbeard and Ned Low, loomed a white blur taller than a man, tall as a waterspout. Upraised arms made long tendrils of gray-white flutter and snap like the wings of a death's head. Wavering, rippling, topping the rocks, the ghost took a long lunging step—

—and men bolted. A musket clattered on rock, a lantern crashed. Fishermen and pirates galloped helter-skelter. Arms windmilling, Blackbeard spun in the air and stampeded away. Knocked sprawling, Joseph Fisher slammed his spine across rocks and coughed as if his chest would split.

The student's scalp crawled as the specter loomed. His over-educated mind recalled that a ghost would disappear if bespoken. Swallowing twice, he croaked, "Begone! Go! Depart this place, apparition, this land of the living—*Uhh!*"

The thing leaned closer. A sob keened above the wind. "My husband! My husband! Where has he gone?"

"Lady Teach!" Clutching his chest to still his pounding heart, Joseph clawed upright in blackness. The tall girl-woman had wrapped herself in a canvas tarpaulin, no doubt the awning from the ship's companionway, and pulled a stiff flap over her hood against the rain, exaggerating her height. "Milady, what are you *doing* out here?"

"I wished to help my husband! Those wretched men seek our treasure! My treasure!"

"Yours?" Joseph blinked rain from his eyes. All he saw was a blur of white with a hollow face.

"That chest is my dowry!" she called above wind and rain. "My husband promised it me on our wedding night! We buried it together, he and I!"

Joseph marveled that Blackbeard had trusted anyone to know where lay his treasure, then his curiosity bumped on. "Did Captain Blackbeard bury a man with it? To make a guardian ghost?"

"Heavens, no! My husband tells a—a great many tales for the amusement of others. Men boast, you know, and sometimes embellish the truth." The woman looked not at Joseph, but distantly, as if addressing invisible accusers, or more ghosts.

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Unnerved, the student turned but found nothing. "I thought to dig up our chest. To move it, you see, to protect it! I've a spade and a lantern. Will you help me? Move it? My husband will lead those dreadful men away. Together we can shift—"

"Yes. Yes, I'll help, madame. Where is it?"

"No, wait." Rain and surf clashed and mingled in her pause. "My husband swore me never to reveal its hiding place!"

Exasperated, Joseph wanted to shout, but she was already flustered. Queer how this moonstruck woman could entertain such a grand and brave scheme, having obviously sailed the captain's gig to this desolate island in darkness, alone. Joseph glimpsed why Blackbeard might have plucked her from a bevy of beauties in Charleston or Savannah. "Madame, I swear by the Gospel never to reveal its hiding place!"

"Oh, that will serve, I expect." Clutching the white sail close, she bumbled across the rocks. "It's not far."

"'Into the eternal darkness, into fire and into ice.'" Joseph was so cold, his tingling feet and hands betrayed him, but he had to help a damsel in distress. And see real pirate treasure. And unearth the truth, whether a body guarded the booty or not. Even help Blackbeard, a desire he couldn't fathom. Surely, curiosity would kill him before consumption could.

Light glimmered as Lady Teach stumbled down into a flume where surf boomed and seethed through seaweed. A lantern showed a patch of gravel no larger than a tabletop, only visible because the tide was down. Blackbeard's wife proferred a spade. "Here! It's here!"

Joseph shoveled against the tide. Seawater and pebbles swirled into the hole, and he could barely see the dark spade against dark gravel, but he dug diligently. Three feet down, steel clanked on iron. Joseph scraped and scraped, but the hole refilled. Dropping to his knees, for he could get no wetter, the student identified by touch an oak chest strapped with iron. He tried to lift it, then rock it, but it might have been bolted to bedrock. Or stuffed with gold and silver.

"I can't budge it, milady! It's too heavy!"

"It is, it is! Even my husband, robust as he is, struggled to lower it!"

Rising, Joseph shook his head, unseen in the dark. He didn't care about treasure, only that no body blocked the hole. "Your dowry is safe, madame! Let's get back before we perish with cold! Less than a drop of blood remains in me that does not tremble!"

The woman agreed. Scraping a few shovelfuls, leaving the tide to bury the rest, the slight man and tall woman used their hands to negotiate the rocks. Rain had ceased, though wind still whipped spume. Lady Teach led to another hollow where bobbed the cap-

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tain's gig that Joseph had found familiar. Though fog still obscured the western mainland, gloom lessened as the sky cracked in the east. The shore glowed rose-red while the sea was streaked with violet. Joseph shivered. "'With the color that paints the morning and evening clouds that face the sun, I saw then the whole heaven suffused.'"

With the tide flowing, the odd pair launched the gig. Uncertain how to tack against the wind, Joseph rowed, feathering his oars. Again he was boggled that this elfstruck woman had sailed alone through a dark void, and said so. Her father was a merchantman, she explained in liquid tones, and she'd lived below-decks as a child. Her father often "transacted business" with Blackbeard, and she'd met the pirate while young, and become infatuated with him. "Then he was widowed, and mourning, and asked for my hand, and paid quite a handsome bride fee, the talk of Charleston!" Touching and romantic, Joseph acknowledged, but could imagine the other side. A late child born to bourgeois contrabandists, with dismal prospects, had been sold out from underfoot for a substantial profit. "'Love hath so long possess'd me for his own, and made his lordship so familiar.'"

Rowing backwards, Joseph glanced over his shoulder. A French-rigged brig was newly moored alongside *Revenge;* Blackbeard's other ship, *The Flying Scot,* had returned from Portsmouth. He expected to see Gosport atwinkle, with pirates milling and fishermen preparing for the day, but the wharves were oddly deserted.

A stutter of pops caught his attention. With long pulls he steered for the island.

As the boat bumped the dock, Joseph heard more shots. Fires licked at two cottages. Men shouted and grappled. In gray half-light their drab clothes and faces all looked alike, but gradually Joseph discerned that Blackbeard's crew warred with Ned Low's while fisherfolk laid low. Lady Teach skipped from the gig. "There's my husband!" Feeling a vague protective urge, or else a kinship with an addle-pate, Joseph jogged after.

Amidst many scuffles, Blackbeard and a gang of sea rovers rushed from behind a cottage, screaming and swinging pistols and cutlasses, to scatter Ned Low's pirates into slippery alleys. A cry from his wife gave Blackbeard pause, and he shouted for Joseph to hold her.

Gaining the tavern, the giant kicked the door to kindling. Hiding fishermen boiled out the door, but like a shark breasting a school of cod, Blackbeard rammed inside. Joseph handed Lady Teach to a fishwife's care and sidled to the doorway.

"Ned Low, ye larcenous dog!" boomed Blackbeard. The ragged Roman-nosed youth cowered by the massive brick chimney. "You'll go to worms!"

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"Captain! Sir!" Low held a pistol in one hand and a cutlass in the other, both forgotten. He'd dealt death to dozens of others, but cringed before his own. "I beg you listen! I didn't—"

"You did!" Jumping inside, Joseph averted Blackbeard's arm. "You were humiliated by the captain, so thirsted for revenge. Philip Babb came to you, no doubt with some scheme. He was a smuggler, and probably reckoned his local knowledge and your crew could find Blackbeard's treasure, or force him to reveal its location. Yet you devised your own scheme. You accosted Babb so he lost an oar, tied his granite anchor around his neck, and sank him, then tied his wherry to Blackbeard's anchor cable! Didn't you? Such a petty prank a child might manufacture; a spiteful trick to stir up trouble but keep you out of sight!"

"And see me swing at the yardarm!" Blackbeard aimed his dread Brescia as Ned Low gibbered denials. "Save your lies for Satan, shab-rag!"

From far off, a triple *pom pom-pom!* beat the air.

The tavern exploded.

Bricks, mortar, ironware, and wood were blasted to flinders and blown all over the island. Smacked by a bench, Blackbeard bowled out the door and took Joseph with him so both dumped in a tangle. Blackbeard lacked his great cocked hat, and his black braids and beribboned beard were chalky. "Blood and bones! That was a cannonball!"

"It struck the chimney!" Joseph's head rang. "But who—"

"Man-o'-war!" came a distant cry. "Fifth-rate, beatin' to windward!"

Staggering around the shattered tavern, rubbing grit from his eyes, Joseph saw that fog still shrouded the coastline, but from the mist tore a thirty-four-gun warship, three masts abloom with sails, the red ensign of the Royal Navy snapping at her taffrail.

"Revengers!" Blackbeard's feud with Ned Low was forgotten. "To the boats! Turn out, Revengers!"

Pandemonium swept the island like a northeast gale. Pirates boiled from alleys and doorways to thunder hell-for-leather for the harbor. Fishermen dodged or were knocked flying. In minutes, it seemed to Joseph, every lotman on the island had vaulted into rowboats and swarmed aboard ships. Even Ned Low had miraculously crawled from the tavern wreckage and sculled to his ship with a panicked crew. Axes chopped anchor cables, and the ships fell away north with a bone in their teeth while the royal warship fought to tack and heel. Within minutes the pirate fleet vanished into the fogbank blurring the Maine coast.

Joseph Fisher shook his head, reflecting that pirates lived by pluck and luck, but their allotted time sputtered down as surely

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as a cannon fuse. Hunkins, the fishing master, approached with a hard squint. "I thought you was his clerk."

"No. 'The devil is not so black as he is painted,' you know. Captain Blackbeard didn't murder Babb and shove his body in the treasure hole."

"I heard. 'Twas Low. Too bad 'bout Phil, but he were a mooncusser, goin' where he shou'n't."

Joseph Fisher nodded towards the pursuing brig. "Someone carried word to the governor that Blackbeard's men dallied in the cathouses?"

"That were me," said Hunkins. "I dispatched two men after dark to 'lert the governor. Damn the Royal Navy! I told 'em Blackbeard and Low might be carousing in Kelly's, but I figured they'd land marines, not fire on us! But you can't expect a snipe to cipher. At least we're shet of pirates. Mainlanders think we're trash out here, you know, that we hide because we're dishonest and we mollycoddle pirates. But fishin's not a life a crooked man would choose. Any work's easier. Any."

"'Consider your origin; you were not born to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.'" Joseph rubbed his eyes, wearied by a long cold night.

And opening them, beheld Blackbeard's seventh wife.

The tall, womanly girl stared out to sea. Shoalers shied away as if from a ghost, until she and Joseph were left alone. Thunderstruck, the student gawped, "Uh, milady, I . . ."

"I have no fear," she pronounced. "I only need wait. My husband will return for me."

But Joseph Fisher, who sometimes saw the future, didn't believe it. As surely as Blackbeard would hang, his wife would wander the shore and wait without relief. "'Yet, turned back as she was into the world, against her pleasure and against good usage, from her heart's veil never was she loosened.'"

So, Joseph realized, the pirate got a ghost to guard his treasure after all.

"'Thus did she speak to me, and then began to sing "Ave Maria," and vanished as she sang, like to a heavy thing through the deep water.'" ●

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SHOWMEN

by Peter Lovesey

Preeminent though he is in historical crime fiction at novel-length, Peter Lovesey rarely sets his short stories in the past. The following tale is an exception. Based on one of Scotland's most notorious true-crime cases, it envisions what might have happened a number of years after the murders committed by Burke and Hare. Mr. Lovesey writes a series of Victorian novels starring Bertie, Prince of Wales.

"Getting rid of the bodies was never a problem for me, sir. Sure, we got rid of so many I lost count."

"Sixteen, they said."

The cracked lips parted and curved. Sixteen was a joke. Everyone knew the official count had been too low.

"You got away with it, too."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Come now, you're a free man, aren't you? Thirty years later, here you are, drinking whisky in the Proud Peacock."

"God bless you, yes."

"A reformed character."

"Well, I'm not without sin, but I've not croaked a fellow creature since those days. I was wicked then, terrible, terrible."

"Does it trouble you still?"

"Not at all."

"Really?"

He roared with laughter. "Jesus, if I thought about it, I'd never get a peaceful night's sleep."

Talking of trouble, it had taken no end of trouble to find the fellow. Rumour had it that he was now an Oxford Street beggar—but trying to find a particular beggar in Oxford Street in 1860 was like looking for a pebble on Brighton beach. From Hyde Park to Holborn, a parade of derelicts pitched for pennies, pleading with passersby, displaying scars and crippled limbs, sightless eyes and underfed infants. They harassed the shoppers, the rich and would-be rich, innocents up from the country trying to reach the great drapery shops, Marshall & Snelgrove and Peter Robinson.

It took a long morning and most of an afternoon of enquiries before William Hare was discovered outside Heath's the Hatmakers, a

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lanky, silver-haired, smiling fellow offering bootlaces for sale and not above accepting charity from those who didn't need laces. "A spare wretch, gruesome and ghoulish," the court reporters had once called him, but at this stage, in his declining years, his looks frightened no one. Animated, grinning, and quick of tongue in his Irish brogue, he competed eagerly for the money in the shoppers' pockets.

To listen to Hare trading on his notoriety, discussing his series of murders, was supposed to be "high *ton,*" the latest thing in entertainment, the best outside the music halls. He was a good raconteur, as the Irish so often are, with a marvellous facility for shifting the blame onto others, notably his partner, Burke, and the anatomist, Dr. Knox.

Of course, he had to be persuaded to talk. He denied his own identity when first it was put to him. The promise of a drink did the trick.

Now, in the pub, he was getting gabbier by the minute.

"Did y'know I was measured by the well-known bumps-on-the-head expert, Mr. Combe, at the time of the trial, or just after? Did y'know that?"

"The phrenologist."

"You're right, your honour. Phrenologist. There's something called the bump of ideality, and mine is a bump to be marvelled at, prodigious, greater than Wordsworth's or Voltaire's. With a bump like mine I could have done beautiful things if my opportunities had been better."

"You made your opportunities."

"Indeed I did." The mouth widened into the grin that was Hare's blessing and his curse.

"You robbed others of their opportunities."

"That's a delicate way of putting it, sir."

"No one murdered so many and lived to tell the tale."

He almost purred at that. "A tale I don't tell very often."

"Unless you're paid."

That nervy smile again. In court, all those years ago, the incessant twitch of his lips had displeased the judge and drawn hisses of contempt from the public gallery. The people of Edinburgh had hated him. The grin inflamed them.

It seemed Hare didn't feel comfortable with his new patron, despite the whisky in his hand. "Tell me, sir, is it possible we met before?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The familiar way you talk to me."

The nerve of the man—as if his crimes had made him one of the elect. "You're notorious, Hare. I know all about you, if that's what you mean."

"I bet you don't, sir, not *all.* You know the worst, but no one ever

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told you the best. People shouldn't believe what they read in the newspapers. The queer thing is, I never planned it, you know. The papers made me out to be a monster, but I was not. It was circumstances, sir, circumstances." He was into his flow now. "The first one, the very first, wasn't one of those we turned off. He was an old soldier, a lodger in the house, the lodging house my woman had in West Port. He faded away of natural causes."

This caused some macabre amusement. "Come now."

"I swear before God, that's the truth," Hare insisted, planting a fist on the table. "Mag and I didn't hasten his leaving at all. We wanted him to live a few days more. His rent was due. Four pounds. And fate cruelly took him to his Maker before his quarterly pension was paid. How can you run a lodging house without the rent coming in?"

"So the circumstance was financial?"

"You have it in a nutshell, sir. He left nothing I could sell. I couldn't go up to the castle and ask the military for his pension. I was forced to go elsewhere for the arrears."

"By selling the corpse."

Hare nodded. "With the help of another lodger, my fellow countryman Mr. Burke, whose name has since become a byword for infamy. Sure, and William Burke was no angel, I have to admit. But I couldn't have managed alone. We removed old Donald from his coffin and weighted it with a sack of wood and gave it a pauper's burial. After dark that evening, we carried the body up to the college on the South Bridge, with a view to donating it to science."

"Selling it, you mean."

"To recover the rent. All of Edinburgh knew the schools of anatomy couldn't get enough corpses. At the time I speak of, eighteen twenty-seven, there were seven anatomists at work in the city, doing dissections to educate the students, and that wasn't enough. The dissecting rooms were like theatres, sir, vast places, crammed to the rafters with students, five hundred at a time. Is it any wonder there was a trade in body snatching? Not that Burke and Hare rifled graves. Say what you like about us, we never stooped to that. Ours were all unburied. We had this innocent corpse, as I told you, and we went in search of Professor Monro."

"Why Monro?"

"You have an item to sell, you're better off going to the top, aren't you? And here's a strange twist of fate. We were standing in the quad with our booty between us in a tea chest when a student happened to come by. I asked him the way to the School of Anatomy. This is where fate interfered, sir. The student wasn't a pupil of the professor. He was one of Dr. Knox's canny little boyos. He sent us down to Cowgate, to Ten Surgeons' Square, the rival establishment." He drew himself up. "That, sir, is the truth of how

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we got drawn into the web of the infamous Dr. Knox. If we'd got to the professor first, the story might have ended differently."

"Why is that?"

"Because of what was said, sir."

"By Dr. Knox?"

"His acolytes, the people at Surgeons' Square. We didn't get to see the old devil that night. We dealt with three of his students. You have to admire his organisation. He had students on duty into the night meeting visitors like ourselves and purchasing bodies, and no questions asked. They paid seven pounds ten. We should have insisted on ten, but we had no experience. The students seemed well pleased with what they got, and so were we, to speak the truth. And then they spoke the words that touched our Irish hearts: 'Sure, we'd be glad to see you again when you have another to dispose of.' Ha—and didn't our ears prick up at that!"

"'*Glad to see you.*' Glad to see the contents of your tea chest, more like."

A cackle greeted this. "And do you know who those students were that night? They became three of the most eminent surgeons in the kingdom. Sir William Fergusson, Thomas Wharton Jones, and Alexander Miller. And here am I, who assisted so handsomely in their education, reduced to begging on the streets."

"Shall I fetch another whisky?"

"I won't say no."

Left alone at the table, William Hare pondered his chances of extracting something more than drink. He had a suspicion the expenses were being met by a newspaper. There was still plenty of macabre interest in the story of Burke and Hare. It was like old times: the law of supply and demand at work again. A paper with an interest in famous crimes ought to be paying him a decent fee for this interview. He might even negotiate a week in a proper hotel.

"Would you mind telling me who you represent?" he asked his companion when he returned to the table.

"Myself."

"You wouldn't be from the press?"

"Certainly not. I'm a showman."

Hare stood up, outraged. "I'm not going into a freak show."

"Please calm down. I haven't the slightest intention of offering you employment. This is simply a quiet tête-à-tête over a whisky."

He remained standing. "What's the show?"

Dismissively, the showman said, "It's totally unconnected with this conversation. If you must know, I am employed for my voice, in a circus, acting as interlocutor, lecturer, and demonstrator for a travelling party of Ojibway Indians from North America."

If anything could silence Hare, it was a man who spoke for a troupe of Ojibway Indians.

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He resumed his seat. "What do you want with me, then?"

"I'm curious about what happened."

"It's all been told before."

"I know that. I want to hear it from the lips of the man who did it. Tell me about your method. How was the killing done?"

"For the love of God, lower your voice," said Hare. "I don't want the whole of London knowing my history." He'd suffered enough in the past from being named in public.

More quietly, the showman said, "You've always insisted that Burke was the prime mover in the business."

Leaning across the table, Hare responded in a low voice, "He did the suffocating, and that's the truth. He always held the pillow."

"But you assisted."

"Only in a passive manner, sir, by lying on the subject, to discourage the arms and legs from interfering. I did it well, too. There was never a mark of violence. Never. That was what saved me from the hangman."

"That, and your gift of the gab."

Hare sniffed. "You're a fine one to comment, by the sound of things. Say what you like, we were professionals, through and through. We didn't take any Tom, Dick, or Harry. They were handpicked. They were not missed, usually, being derelicts, simpletons, and women of the unfortunate class. And it didn't matter what sort of scum they were when they were lying on Dr. Knox's slab. He called them his subjects." He laughed. "Straight, that's the truth. His subjects. You'd think he was the king himself."

"What did you call them? Your victims?"

"Our shots. Did I say a moment ago that none of them were missed? I'd better correct that. We did have an enquiry from the daughter of one of our shots, a grown woman, a whore. She came looking for her mother." He paused. His timing was part of the act. "We got sixteen pounds for the pair."

"Did you ever sell a corpse to anyone else?"

"No, sir. Only to Dr. Knox. I'll say this for him—and I won't say much for that odious sawbones—he knew how to guard his reputation. There was one we took to his rooms, known in the city as Daft Jamie, a bit of a character this one had been. Jamie always went barefoot, winter and summer, and they were queer feet, if you understand me, misshapen. Well, when we pulled him out of the tea chest in the dissecting room, three or four people, including the janitor, said, 'That's Daft Jamie!' But Dr. Knox would have none of it. He said it couldn't be. Burkey and I guarded our tongues and took the money."

"You believe Dr. Knox was pretending?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why?"

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"Because later there was a bit of a hue and cry about Jamie. His mother and sister went around the town asking questions. And as soon as old Knox heard of that, he ordered the corpse to be dissected and the parts dispersed. Mr. Fergusson took the feet away, and one of the others had the head, so that if the police came calling, no one would know now. In the summer, Burkey went visiting his woman's people in Falkirk, and when they returned, he smelt a rat. Thought I'd done a little work on my own account, taken a shot to Dr. Knox and pocketed the reward without telling him. The leery devil trots off to Surgeons' Square to get the truth of it. When he's told they paid me eight pounds for a female, he leaves my lodging house in a huff. Found new lodgings."

"That must have put a blight on your arrangements."

"Not for long, sir. Burkey got short of money and came skulking back with a new proposal. A cousin of his woman's, a young girl he'd met in Falkirk, came to stay. He asked me to take the first steps in the matter, the girl being a relative."

"You did the smothering on this occasion?"

"As a kindness to his family. A ten-pound shot. But Burke never lodged with us anymore."

"You were back in business, though."

A twitchy smile. "We did a few more, and then the fates put a stop to our capers. Burke asked me and my woman Mag to his lodging to celebrate Halloween. What a disaster! If only I'd had the sense to refuse. He'd found another shot, of course, some old beggar woman called Docherty. Sure, she was Irish, like Burkey and myself, and only too willing to join the party. But all he had was the one room to do it in. What's more, he had lodgers, a family called Gray, who slept on straw on the floor. To simplify matters, I said the Grays could remove to our place that night, and they did. So it was just Burke and his Nell, me and my Mag, and old Mrs. Docherty. Well, we all had a few drinks too many, and the old woman screamed, "Murder!" and one of the neighbours went to look for a policeman."

"You were arrested?"

"No, sir." The smirk again. "You know how it is with the guardians of the law. They're like the bloody omnibuses. You can never find one when you want one. What did for us was Burke's incompetence. When the Gray family came back next morning, the corpse was still in the room, under the straw they slept on. Can you believe that? Like a bat out of hell, Gray goes to the police."

Hare's companion took a thoughtful swig of his drink. He wasn't writing any of this down. "You don't have to talk about the trial," he said. "How you turned King's Evidence to escape the noose."

"To assist the law, sir. They had no case without me. As I told you a moment ago, there wasn't so much as a scratch on the bodies."

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"You had a few more brains in your head than Burke."

"He swung, as you know, sir."

"And his corpse, fittingly enough, was presented to Professor Monro to be dissected."

"Yes," said Hare cheerfully. "And did you hear about the lying-in-state?"

"The *what?*"

Hare laughed. "Burkey was never so popular as when he was on the slab. The judge, in his wisdom, decreed that he should be anatomized in public and the public demanded to see the result. Thirty thousand filed through the room. Most of Edinburgh, if you ask me. The line stretched for over a mile."

"Your companion, flayed, salted, and preserved, packed into a barrel—for science, as you would put it. His skin cut into pieces and sold as souvenirs. I believe his skeleton can still be seen at the university."

This was not part of the script, the audience taking over. Hare didn't care for it. Moreover, he had detected a note of censure. He stated emphatically, "It was no bed of roses for me, sir. They tried their damnedest to make me go the way of Burke. A private prosecution, followed by a civil action. They failed, but it was mental persecution. And when I finally got my liberty I was in fear of my life from the mob outside. They wanted to lynch me."

"And no wonder."

"I had to be smuggled out of the gaol, disguised. I was put on the southward mail coach. As bad luck would have it, one of my fellow passengers had featured in the trial as a junior counsel, and he recognised me and blabbed to the others. The news was out. At Dumfries, I was practically mobbed. It was ugly, sir, uncommon ugly. I holed up in the King's Arms for a time, but it wasn't safe. The authorities removed me to the gaol for my own safety, and the jackals outside bayed for my blood all night. It took a hundred specials to disperse them."

"But you got away."

"Under armed guard. The militia escorted me across the border."

"You're a fortunate man, Hare."

"You think so? A ruin, more like. Look at me. I'll tell you who was a fortunate man, and that's the piece of excrement they called Knox. He was in it up to his ears, as guilty as Burke, and guiltier than me."

"Why so?"

"Knox was the instigator, wasn't he? He knew everything, everything. He dealt with us in person a dozen times. Oh, he denied it, of course. For pity's sake, where did he think the bodies were coming from, freshly dead and regular as clockwork? The people weren't fooled just because he was a doctor."

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"Surgeon, in fact. You should be careful with your choice of words. The people you just referred to were the same crowd you described as the mob a moment ago."

Hare laughed. "Mob they may have been, but they knew all about Knox. I know for a fact that they met on Calton Hill and made an effigy of the bastard, and carried it in procession all the way to his house in Newington Place, where they burned it in his garden and smashed all his windows."

"So they did."

"You heard of it, too?"

"Indeed," said the showman. "Moreover, they attacked his dissecting rooms. Like you, he fled. He was thought to have gone into hiding in Portobello, so they made another effigy and hanged it on a gibbet at the top of Tower Street there. You were not alone in being an object of hatred."

"He got his job back," Hare pointed out. "The same year he was back in Surgeons' Square cutting up bodies."

"Ah, but he was obliged to suffer the indignity of a university committee of enquiry. They found nothing actionable in his past conduct. There's the difference, Hare. You stand condemned—or you should have, if there were any justice. Dr. Knox was exonerated of blame in the matter."

"Absurd," muttered Hare.

"What do you mean?"

"They would never sack him. He was a god to his students. They adored the bastard. His classes numbered over five hundred."

"However, his career was blighted. You may not know this, but he twice applied for chairs of the university, and was twice humiliated. He was compelled to relinquish his career at Edinburgh. He moved to Glasgow."

"And I'm moved to tears," said Hare. "I hope he died spitting blood in the poorest tenement in the Gorbals."

"You're still a bitter man."

"I've reason to be bitter. Dr. Knox underpaid us for the last one."

"The last one? I don't understand."

"The old Irish woman I was telling you about. Mrs. Docherty, on Halloween. You see, we delivered her to Knox the day the game was up. We had to get rid of it. He only paid us half. Said we could have the rest on Monday. We never got our second five pounds."

"And that still irks?"

"No man has treated me with anything but derision . . . until today."

"Just a couple of drinks so far."

The "so far" emboldened Hare to say, in the wheedling tone that worked best for him, "Would you see your way to the price of a bed

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in return for all the inside information I've given you in confidence, sir?"

"I can do better than that. If I give you money, you'll only blow it on drink. I can offer you accommodation. I have rooms in Hackney. A humble address, but better than the places you inhabit, I'll warrant."

"Hackney. That's not far."

"Shall we treat ourselves to a cab ride?"

Hare beamed. "Why not, sir? And if you want to introduce me to your friends and neighbours, I won't object."

"That won't be necessary."

"I am the only man to be exhibited in the Chamber of Horrors in his lifetime. Baker Street—my other address," he joked, "—care of Madame Tussaud."

"Shall we leave?"

"If you're ready, then so am I." Hare finished the last of the whisky and stood up. He reached out with his right hand, groping at the space between them. "It would help me if I took your arm, sir."

"Of course." The showman enquired with what sounded like a note of concern, "How did you come to lose your sight?"

"That was after I came south, sir. I got a job. Labouring—that's my occupation. It was all right for a time. I got on well enough with the others. Then—pure vanity—I confided in one of my mates that I was the smarter half of the old partnership. Smart! You know what? They set upon me. Threw me into a lime pit. Vicious. Destroyed my eyes. I've been a vagrant ever since. Do you know what I most regret?"

"I've no idea."

He permitted himself another smile. "I shall never see myself in the Chamber of Horrors."

"Careful, there's a step down."

"Down to what, sir?" quipped Hare. "A meeting with Old Nick?"

They made their way out of the pub and took the first cab that came along. Heading east, it was soon lost to view in the Oxford Street traffic.

The encounter just described is a fantasy based on accounts of the case, but the story can end with facts. William Hare, who combined with Burke to commit the West Port Murders of 1828, was said to have been a familiar figure, blind and begging in Oxford Street until about 1860.

The famous anatomist Dr. Robert Knox also ended his days in relative obscurity, as a general practitioner in Hackney, and latterly as "lecturer, demonstrator, or showman to a travelling party of Ojibbeway Indians." He died of a stroke in 1862 at the age of 71.

Hare just disappeared. ●

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CAVEMAN, RETURNING HOME FROM WORK, ASKS WIFE HOW HER DAY WENT

by Katherine H. Brooks

Me glad you home, Big Ugh, this day.
Me gotta lotta thing to say.
Them son, belongen me and you,
Not hunt for food. They not much do,
But dirty picture scratch on cave.
Me not know why they bad behave.
All day when you not here they shout,
And pee on fire to put it out.
They look for girl, but not for wood.
I tellum if they not be good
You hittum hard with cudgel spike,
Then first born say, "Me not much like!"
And push small brother off a cliff.
(He got four more, so what the diff?)

Big Hunter Throm, he chatchum goat.
And give to wife to make fur coat.
I take big club and hit on head,
Then sew warm boot for you instead.
Big Hunter Throm and brother, Moo,
Come kill you soon, if they can do,
And so I find some game for eat,
And mash much berry under feet,
For sit beside the fire and drink,
Then you not pull my hair, I think.
I fix you nice a rabbit paw,
A eagle bone for you to gnaw,
And Gug and Grunch and Gog and Gak
And Boggy, too, they rub your back.

The fire now hot. Sit down you there,
While I pick nit from out of hair,
And help make sharpen knife point, too,
For stick in Hunter Throm, and Moo.

Poem ©2000 by Katherine H. Brooks

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NEXT ISSUE...

The Death Row Pet Show
BY DOUG ALLYN

An Old School Friend
BY ROBIN HATHAWAY

The Road's End
BY BRENDAN DUBOIS

The Last Is Adoration
BY WENDY HORNSBY

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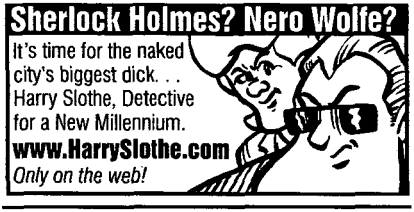
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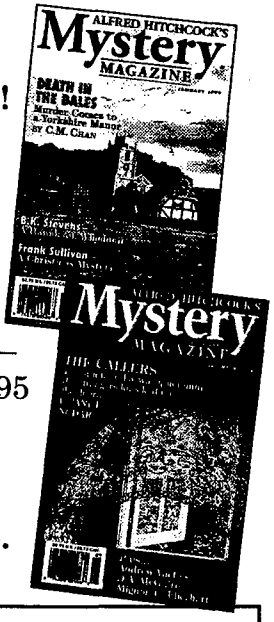

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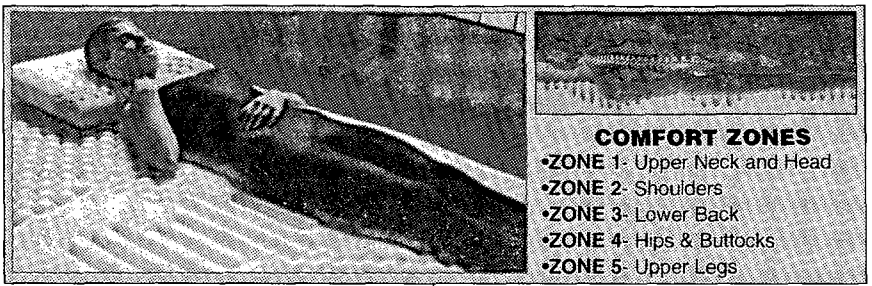

Traditional mattresses leave your lower back and legs unsupported and hinder proper circulation. Even expensive waterbeds, which are supposed to distribute weight evenly, fail to support the body properly. Your spine arches downward, in a position specialists refer to as "hammocking," causing excessive strain on the back. Scientists and doctors agree that the ideal position is a neutral body posture which the different parts of the human body are supported individually and evenly. This is the secret behind NatureSleep Platinum, the revolutionary product that turns any bed into the ideal sleep surface.

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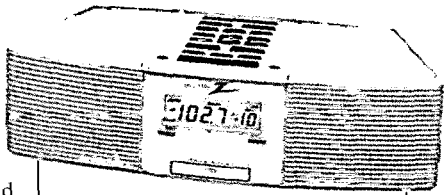

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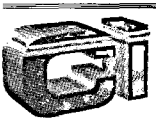

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